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STARTLING *stories*

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featuring **THE TIME MASTERS** a novel by Wilson Tucker

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and **HIS HEAD IN THE CLOUDS** by Kendell Foster Crossen

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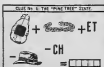
HOW TO SOLVE SAMPLE PUZZLE

CLUE No. 1: THE "HOOSIER" STATE.



You will see there are a SINK, a DIAL, the SOLE of a shoe and various letters of the alphabet. There are two plus and two minus signs. It is necessary to add and subtract the names and letters as shown by the plus and minus signs. First, write down SINK. Then, add DIAL to it. Next, add ONEA. All this equals SINKDIALONEA. Now, you must subtract the letters in SOLE and K. When this is done you are left with INDIANA. Indiana is the Hoosier State, so the result checks with Clue No. 1.

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STARTLING

stories

Vol. 31, No. 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION

January, 1954

Featured Novel

THE TIME MASTERS Wilson Tucker 10

They were lost on an alien planet—Earth—and there was nothing that could ever bring this man and woman together!

A Novelet

HIS HEAD IN THE CLOUDS . . . Kendell Foster Crossen 88

Lanny Pell was a dreamer with his feet planted in trouble!

Short Stories

ESCAPE Joseph Shallit 75

He took a big step but didn't expect to put his foot in it

THE UNPREY SPRAY Joseph Slotkin 85

It looked like the answer—but it only raised a question

A PRESENT FOR PAT Philip K. Dick 102

Eric didn't know what he began when he bought that package

THE MONITOR Margaret St. Clair 113

They were all too young or too old to look after themselves

Features

THE ETHER VIBRATES The Editor 6

VIDEO-TECHNICS Pat Jones 8

THE BIG OPERATORS Curt Storm 81

SCIENCE FICTION BOOKSHELF Reviews 129

"The Time Masters," Copyright, 1953, by Wilson Tucker, and specially abridged from the \$2.50 book published by Rinehart Books, Inc.

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Cover Painting by
WALTER POPP

STARTLING STORIES. Published quarterly by Better Publications, Inc., N. L. Pines, President, at 1125 E. Valle Ave., Kokomo, Ind. Editorial and executive offices, 10 East 40th St., New York 16, N. Y. Entered as second-class matter at the post office at Kokomo, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1953, by Better Publications, Inc. Subscription (12 issues), \$3.00; single copies, \$.25; foreign and Canadian postage extra. In corresponding with this magazine please include postal zone number, if any. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelope and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence. January, 1954, issue.
PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.



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A Science Fiction Department Featuring Letters From Readers

THAT staid publication, *The New York Times*, reports with a lift of the eyebrow the events of the recent International Astronautical Federation meeting at Zurich, from which emanated "Seemingly impossible propositions on the borders of science fiction." The quotes are the *Times'*. That reputable scientists should seriously discuss space travel still seems to amaze this cautious publication, which gives the impression that it is not lightly to be stamped into accepting new ideas.

It seems that Dr. Eugen Saenger and his wife, who the *Times* admits are "responsible scientists," offered a suggestion that space ships might be propelled by photons—or light particles. The Saengers are not merely dreamers either, they are employed by the French government and are currently exploring the problems of supersonic flight.

This suggestion to use photons as a propellant is not new to science fiction readers, however it may have struck the *Times'* reporter. And whether Dr. Saenger and his wife have been reading science fiction or got the idea independently cannot be determined. At this point they offered no blueprint for a mechanism to do the job.

They went no further than the idea that such a method of propulsion might some day be feasible.

A photon-propelled space ship, they went on to say, could function efficiently only outside atmospheric (or gravitational) limits.

For the first step off a planet, some conventional fuel still needs to be developed. Chemical fuels have pushed rockets to a speed of two miles a second, less than a third of the seven miles per second usually

figured as escape velocity. Additional speeds might be achieved through combinations of hydrogen and fluorine, but the top limit is still low, and more efficiency would seem to lie in the direction of the use of energy from a controlled hydrogen or thermonuclear reaction.

To the conventional outlook, the prospect of achieving speeds close to that of light, say 180,000 miles a second, is shattering. Certainly the *Times* reporter was shattered by it, for he added that after toying with such "space-annihilating possibilities," conjecturing about mere space satellites seemed like child's play.

If he is so upset about the thought of speeds merely approaching that of light, we shudder to think of the danger to his equilibrium should he be told that speeds this slow are completely unsatisfactory. They will serve for interplanetary flight where the distances might be a few paltry million miles. But man will never travel to the stars unless he vastly exceeds the speed of light. For here the distances are so huge that generations will live and die before the journey is hardly begun.

We recall, of course, the discussion from Arthur Clarke's book "The Exploration of Space," that time slows down as speed approaches that of light, so that a flight which saw thousands of years pass on earth would appear to be only a few years to the crew. Unfortunately this is no solution. Few spacemen would enjoy setting out on a voyage knowing that they would never again see the Earth or the people they knew. The alternative must be some short cut which bypasses the laws of speed and time—or no interstellar travel.

All the same we'd give a nickel for a

(Continued on page 117)

WHAT SECRET POWER DID THIS MAN POSSESS?



Benjamin Franklin
(A Rosicrucian)

WHY was this man great? How does anyone—man or woman—achieve greatness? Is it not by mastery of the powers within ourselves?

Know the mysterious world within you! Attune yourself to the wisdom of the ages! Grasp the inner power of your mind! Learn the secrets of a full and peaceful life! Benjamin Franklin—like many other learned and great men and women—was a Rosicrucian. The Rosicrucians (NOT a religious organization) first came to America in 1694. Today, headquarters of the Rosicrucians send over seven million pieces of mail annually to all parts of the world.

The Rosicrucians

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"Impressions of Outer Space" brings

the music of the spheres

to your living room—get hep to this

new venture in scienti-music!

VIDEO-

THE music of the spheres, for centuries the exclusive province of poets and philosophers, now makes its debut on *LP* records. Convinced as we are that science fiction readers are a hybrid of these two, Videotex goes a bit afield this trip to let you in on the musical doings.

The orbital orchestrations to which we refer are titled *IMPRESSIONS OF OUTER SPACE* and can be found on the *Brunswick* label, No. BL 58062. Larry Elgart, versatile director of this first space ensemble provides some decidedly evoca-

tive music. We wouldn't be surprised if this is the sort of musical fare space crews will demand on the first rocket to the moon!

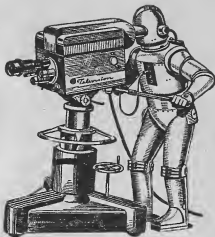
It all started with a trio of recent converts to science fiction who also happened to be in the music business. One of them was New York disc jockey Al ("Jazzbo") Collins whose WNEW show "Purple Grotto" is one of the most popular in the metropolitan area. The others were Bill Simon, a music publisher and Larry Elgart, a conductor whose interest in things off-beat first lured him to the science fiction fold.



Elgart, Collins and Crossen share more than an interest in science fiction

TECHNICS

by PAT JONES



It started with a book called "Once Upon a Star" by Ken Crossen. This Manning Draco anthology of stories from TWS was recently published by Henry Holt, and its appearance made quite an impression on Bill, Larry and Jazzbo. After reading more of the same, they began to wonder what could be done with science fiction themes in music. Naturally they began querying their friends for a solution to their musical problem. In no time they found several composers willing to tackle the tricky feat of translating science fiction from prose to jazz.

The result? Eight sides of music as different in perspective as a trip through space. Lee Pockriss composed sides titled "Beyond Gravity" and "Airless Moon." From Charles Albertine came "Lunar Sleep," "Asteroid Ballet," "Primordial Matter," "Space Intoxication" and "Purple Planet." Then there's "Gravitational Whirlpool," the work of Kermit Levinsky.

To get down to the music. Comes the revolution—of your turntable, that is—we think you'll find these unconventional compositions both perplexing and stimulating. The Larry Elgart Ensemble is extremely unorthodox in its instrumentation, comprised as it is of five saxophones, trombone, piano, bass and percussion. The music paints tonal pictures, drawing often on the colors and rhythms of jazz. Notwithstanding, it draws on the materials of legitimate composition as well, with all the broad emotional and intellectual scope it implies. What delights us most, however, is the unmistakable quality of humor which pervades some of the works. Not surprising,

though, when you recall that Ken Crossen had a hand in starting all this.

For those who find their musical tastes a trifle more conventional than their literary preferences, the imaginative program notes provided by editor Samuel Mines should prove helpful. The armchair spaceman will find his mood easily set by the notes and the original verse of the distinguished poet, Louis Untermeyer. This unique coupling of talents makes **IMPRESSIONS OF OUTER SPACE** a collector's item for any library, be it musical or literary.

Incidentally, the striking jacket, a tribute to the purple domain of "Jazzbo" Collins, will catch your eye. The price for this intoxicating album? Three shekels—Tetran specie. And a suggestion; try it for background effect the next time you pick up a copy of *Startling*!

We were interested to see that Dr. Marshall Stearns, a professor of English (teaches Chaucer) is starting a course in a New York college described thusly: "The Role of Jazz in American Culture." This is encouraging news for science fiction readers; with academic scorn dissipating gradually in the field of twentieth century music, twentieth century fiction may soon have its place on academic curricula. **IMPRESSIONS OF OUTER SPACE** may well herald an era in which the living culture of an age is appreciated by its own generation, rather than venerated by those of a future time.

We're in favor of anything that breaks down cultural lethargy, and that's what **Brunswick** has done with this striking album.

The Time Masters

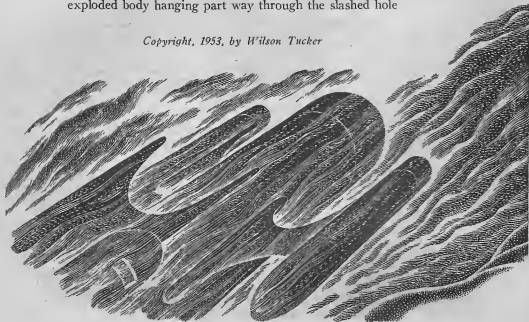
A Novel by WILSON TUCKER

Prologue

HE FELL slowly through a black and colorless vacuum which still lacked sufficient substance to be called a sky, his encased body a diminutive mote pinwheeling in ridiculous fashion toward the planet somewhere below. A strange sun and stranger stars whirled around him in kaleidoscope effect.

Not far away another body tumbled with him, a lifeless exploded body hanging part way through the slashed hole

Copyright, 1953, by Wilson Tucker



*They were lost on an
alien planet—Earth—and
nothing could bring this
man and woman together!*

Illustrated by VIRGIL FINLAY



in the air-suit. That other body had not been so quick or so fortunate, had not escaped the demolished ship with its suit and its life intact. He did not recognize his dead companion—could not, really, but he supposed it had been some crew member. The two of them drifted leisurely downward. Were there others?

The ship was long gone, after plummeting past like a spent but monstrous bullet, to burst into searing flame as it struck the atmosphere and cindered. There had been scant time to escape the doomed vessel. The rocketing thunder of the meteorite ripping into the hull and invading the power room had made the warning bells faint by comparison and quite useless as a signal of alarm. He had automatically zipped his air-suit at the first invading crash—a reflex motion instilled in him by long conditioning—not feeling personal danger or consternation until a full second later when he spun toward his wife on the bunk, and he experienced a momentary anguish that she would not be able to close her suit in time. In that timeless interval the big ship had exploded at the seams, torn apart from the sudden backlash of power unleashed in the stern. He was catapulted into space.

He still did not know if his wife had saved herself.

The invading meteorite had continued its unseen way, but the shattered, hurtling ship had fallen like a black hulk until it struck the planet's atmosphere far below. And since then he had lazily followed it down, he and that other lifeless body near by. He closed his eyes to shut out the sight of it.

Were there other survivors?

He sensed a thin layer of air about him and opened his eyes to discover a faint, faltering daylight. His suit was beginning to react to the tenuous atmosphere. In the next glance he saw his lifeless companion again and turned his head away to look below, instinctively bringing his feet together so that the conjoint energy of the two metal shoes would right him, would cause him to fall feet first toward the planet.

The world below was an unknown mystery. There were both light and dark areas scattered over the world, indicating land and seas; and though he strained his eyes toward the night side, he could find no illumination that might betray a city or a sign of civilization.

He clutched the belt about his waist that contained emergency rations and once more turned to look at his dead follower. Food on the strange world might or might not be a problem, but the question of suitable water was of paramount importance. The seas were useless without refining equipment; sufficient rain water could be hard to come by and even then might not be too palatable—he would be wise to take the rations belonging to the dead man.

A shipwrecked man either lived by his wits, or he did not live at all.

The atmosphere was gaining substance and depth but still he continued to fall, keeping his feet together that the energized shoes might increase his speed of descent. Off to one side the setting sun kissed the waters of a nameless sea.

He thought again of his wife, wondering if she had been blown clear of the doomed ship. Would he be able to find her again on the wide world below his feet—if she were alive? Would he be able to locate any other survivors—if they existed? It would be like hunting a lost traveler in a vast jungle, or seeking a castaway on an uncharted island.

He never thought of himself as lost, as a castaway. He had lived through a stunning calamity, and when he touched ground again he would continue to live if he was able.

He forced his feet apart finally to slow his fall. He was descending on a desolate, sandy shore.

I
CUMMINGS, just in from Washington, folded his hands over the thick sheaf of typed papers lying on the desk and let his attention stray to the patch of sunlight spilling in the window. It

was a warm summer sun and the window was open, letting in the mild traffic noises of the Knoxville streets. The hasty flight from Washington had upset him, disturbed his heart and his stomach as flights always did, and he sought comfort in the warm splotch of light.

The second man in the small office held his silence, waiting for his superior to speak.

Still waiting for his body to attain a quietness, Cummings said, "It wasn't at all necessary to include that vacation request, Dikty. You know me better than that."

with my own eyes and therefore I *know* he exists. The man *must* have a set of parents, *must* have a flesh-and-blood point of beginning in space and time." He opened the palms of his hands in despair. "But where? The subject simply appeared—*pop*—on a day and year, and has existed since."

Cummings moved his hands idly over the typed reports.

"What was the day and year?" he asked.

"March 8th, 1940."

The supervisor closed his eyes. After a moment, Cummings spoke.

Strange Invasion

REPETING its innovation of last year, SS snatches a top-flight science fiction novel done for the book field which might not have seen magazine publication for years to come.

Wilson Tucker needs little introduction to readers. A movie projectionist by trade, he also published an excellent fanmag, now unhappily defunct, and has published a list of novels, science fiction and detective, which might make a full-time writer envious. **THE TIME MASTERS** is his newest — an engrossing story of a strange invasion from outer space.

—The Editor

Dikty nodded.

"I know you. But I left you that loophole, just in case you wanted to put another man on. I hate to admit it but I've fallen down on the job." He waved a tired hand at the stack of papers on the desk. "I know all of *that* about the subject, and yet I know nothing."

"A tough one," Cummings said almost to himself.

"A tough one," Dikty agreed again. "I'm stopped. Everybody has to be born sometime, somewhere! But not this man—apparently."

The supervisor's responding smile was small and fleeting, entirely lacking in humor.

"Another loophole," Dikty explained uselessly. "I'm assuming he *was* born." A trace of bitterness crept into the investigator's voice. "I've seen the man

"Does that date mean anything to you?"

"Beyond being the birthday of my second child, no."

Cummings hesitated a moment before replying. "March 8th, or thereabouts, was one of the birthdays of hell on earth. You could also consider it *our* birthday in a manner of speaking; at least, the tentative plans for a secret security police went on paper at that time. On or about March 8th, 1940, the President set up the National Defense District and our organization grew out of that."

"I had always thought Manhattan was the beginning," Dikty said absently.

"No." Cummings opened his eyes again. "Another one of those eternal committees came first, in 1939. I forget the name. It didn't amount to much

because it was hampered by lack of funds and lack of support in the right places, but *it* was the beginning of hell. Our Research Committee grew out of that in 1940, and the Office of Scientific Research and Development grew out of that in 1941. Finally the Manhattan District sprang from them all, in 1942." He sighed. "And there we are with more birthdays than you can count; I sometimes don't blame the public for being confused with Washington's confusion."

"Which would you say was *the* birthday?"

"Which indeed?" Cummings shrugged his shoulders and almost lifted his eyes from the floor. "It all depends on which date you prefer to observe—if any. The first atomic bomb explosion occurred out there on the desert in July, 1945. But the men responsible for that one regard the real birthday as three years earlier."

"Three?"

Cummings nodded. "Those men obtained their first real chain reaction in December, 1942. They want that recognized as hell's birthday. Personally, I don't know if the date should be carved in stone and worshiped, or thrown away and forgotten. I think it is the worst step in progress since gunpowder. Oh well, what most concerns us now is March 8th, 1940. The subject under surveillance first appeared on that date."

"He came here to Knoxville about two years later," Dikty continued after a moment. "And I do know what that date means. When the first engineers walked out into the hills west of here to survey the site for Oak Ridge, our subject had already appeared on the scene and opened an office." Then he added bitterly, "He calls it an office. Just a couple of blocks from this spot, if you please."

Cummings smiled again, a faint trace of genuine humor turning the corners of his lips. "I appreciate that, too. I wonder if you do?"

"That he located so close to us?"

"That somehow he anticipated us

again. *We* didn't get here until several months later, until ground had already been broken on the Ridge. But study the over-all picture, the places and dates as a whole. On or about March 8th, 1940, three things happened—besides the birth of your second child. One, the powers-that-be in Washington decided in earnest to build an atomic bomb and began pouring important money into research. Two, those same powers realized the need of a highly secret security force to guard the bomb, and to guard the guards of the bomb—a hidden wheel within the wheel. And finally three, our subject makes his first appearance in public. Day and year, all three items. It occurs to me that he might have known of the events of March 8th in advance, and timed his appearance accordingly."

"But I located him in Miami on that date," Dikty protested.

"To be precise, you have succeeded admirably in tracing him back to Miami on March 8th of that year. He purchased a used car there and thus established himself for our scrutiny. You were unable to trace him back before the purchase."

"That's correct, and that's where I fell down. There isn't any kind of a trail or hint of a trail prior to that date—in Miami or any other city I've searched." The strong bitterness had returned to his voice.

"So we know," Cummings continued "that he was in Florida on the same day that historic events transpired in Washington. Very well. Eventually our subject wanders into Tennessee and opens an office here in Knoxville, shortly before the government begins building Oak Ridge twenty-some miles away. We see that it has taken him two years to drift the distance from Florida; he certainly has little regard for time, hasn't he? There is nothing really alarming about those facts when considered out of context, is there? Which is why I say he somehow anticipated us again—he arrived before we did, to allay suspicion."

Dikty slouched in his chair.

"Fantastic."

"Agreed." The supervisor nodded slowly. "And so you can tear up that formal request for a vacation. I realize what you've run up against and I appreciate what you've been able to do. Tell me about the man."

Dikty hauled an old pipe out of his coat pocket and pointed the stem at the desk. "It's all there in—"

"I don't want to read about him. I want to hear your version of him, impressions and opinions and all." He thumped the papers with locked hands. "This is the dry way of telling it, this is the formal way you dictated it to Hoffman. I'd rather listen to your emotions paint in the colors. Tell me about the man."

The assistant said hesitantly, "He saved my life."

"Yes. And so you will color him. I want to hear that."

DIKTY packed and lit the pipe, sending great clouds of smoke churning toward the ceiling. "It was about a year and a half ago—we had just cleaned up that McKeown business, remember? My wife and the children were coming in on the train and I was late to meet them; I didn't realize how late it was getting until I heard a train whistle." Dikty paused, the memory strong in his mind. I saw a taxi parked about half a block away, and I made for that. I remember thinking that if the cabby took the short cuts and cheated on the red lights, we could get to the station in time.

"I was—oh, fifty or sixty feet from the cab when I first noticed the woman, an ordinary sort of woman with bundles in her arms. She was running for the same taxi and with a determination to beat me to it. I didn't have a gallant spark in me—I wanted that cab and I wanted to reach the railway station in a hurry, so I continued running. I'd have made it, too—the cab that is— if he hadn't stepped in front of me. I blinked, I suppose, and there he was, right in my path. I threw out my hands to keep from colliding with him and he had done the same—for a second or so we stood

there, our hands and arms locked in balance with each other. When I finally got free and stepped around him, the woman was entering the taxi. It sped away from the curb."

"And," the supervisor suggested.

"That cab rocketed away from the curb and smashed into a gasoline truck at the next intersection. Both vehicles went up in flames."

There was a small silence in the office. Outside the closed door of the room a stenographer's typewriter was busy. That was the only sound for long moments.

"And our subject?"

"I have no idea," Dikty supplied. "As soon as I could move after the crash, I ran to call the fire department. When I returned to the scene I thought to look for the man but he wasn't there. I must have stayed there fifteen or twenty minutes before I again remembered my wife. I took another cab—with instructions to drive slowly—and met her at the station. She was crying."

"Crying?"

"Yes. There was something odd in her behavior when she saw me and our reunion was rather—affectionate. Quite some time afterward I found out why. The night before coming home she had dreamed of my death; it seems that I was killed in an automobile accident. And you see, when I was so late meeting the train, she thought. . . ."

Cummings nodded. "Yes."

"Well—that was my introduction to the subject. I never saw him again until a few months ago, when I received your instructions to investigate him. The name meant nothing to me so I started in the routine manner. He maintains a small office in that building down there—" Dikty pointed through the open window—"and seems to have a small amount of business. He doesn't advertise himself as a private detective or anything so melodramatic—his office door merely contains his name and the word, *Investigations*. He has the proper credentials from the police; he did not apply for a permit to carry a gun, and

he has never been involved in any unsavory situation since he arrived here in 1942. The police haven't a bad word to say about him—although no one seems to be really friendly with him. The sort of man who keeps to himself and obeys all the rules."

Dikty found that his pipe had gone out, and relighted it.

"When I first saw him, I remembered him as the man who had prevented me from reaching the cab. Up until that moment I considered the whole affair a fortunate coincidence. When I saw him, in line of investigation, my convictions changed on the spot. I can't tell you why, but as I studied his face I realized that he deliberately stopped me that day to save me." Dikty put his hand to his forehead. "But I can't explain why I think that. I just *do*."

"I'll believe it," Cummings said.

"If I had met him in any other way, I suppose I would have reacted normally. I'd have gone on thinking our earlier meeting was a lucky break for me. I'd have bought the man a drink, pumped his hand and probably made a complete ass of myself. But because he was a subject under investigation I leaped to the conclusion that our first meeting was *not* a coincidence. And that, in turn, made me realize what kind of a meeting it had been. He deliberately saved my life with—well, hardly malice afthought.

"He is a tall man, three or four inches taller than myself. Well over six foot, I'd say. Wears his hair in a crew cut, light brown, almost sandy." Dikty glanced at his superior. "He looks like an Egyptian."

"What?"

"An Egyptian. Tanned skin as though most of his life had been spent out of doors; a strangely hardened or *old* skin as though he had been living on a desert or the windy plains. I found his eyes quite odd. The corneas are yellow. That is a peculiarity common to people in the Far East and sometimes the Middle East. It strengthened my impression of an Egyptian. Physically, he's a fine

specimen. Lithe—I'd judge his weight at about one-seventy-five, evenly distributed. For some queer reason he gives the impression of speed in his build, as though he were constantly poised for flight, or had been a track star in college and continued to keep in practice. Trim and fast, always alert for something.

"He seems to be a quiet, unassuming man, not married. Drives a two-year-old car and lives alone just outside of town on a rented place, a mile or so beyond the trailer camp. Has a small house and a couple of acres out there—nice rural picture except that he doesn't follow the pattern set by the neighbors. No garden, no poultry, no livestock—just himself and an apple orchard. He doesn't visit or encourage visitors. If he has any women friends, I haven't discovered them. I've checked his mail through the post office and he receives little or nothing beyond a mass of technical journals and books. His evenings are as quiet as his days—sometimes at the library, once in a while a movie, occasionally just walking about town, but mostly at home alone. Bookworm type. He is less a part of this town than the people living in the trailers."

"You haven't mentioned his age," Cummings said.

"No—I haven't." Dikty stared at his supervisor, a wrinkled frown creasing his forehead. "When he first made application to the police for his license in 1942, he stated he was thirty-one."

Cummings nodded. "And today?"

"He seems to be thirty-one."

Cummings added in an ironic undertone, "Apparently."

"Tell me—why our investigation? What started it?"

Cummings answered finally. "Someone discovered that he subscribed to every bulletin and journal of science currently published in the free world." Cummings waved a broad, sweeping hand. "Archeology, geology, astronomy, meteorology, chemistry, medicine, nuclear physics—everything. It was that last which attracted our attention.

Someone was checking the subscription lists and stumbled across his name on them all, down to and including a social journal for the atomic scientists. When someone noticed that his address, was Knoxville, the routine began." His hard knuckles rapped the papers on the desk "And you know the rest."

Dikty was still frowning. "Subject apparently has an overly healthy interest in science. All science."

"Subject's interest might even be an unhealthy one," Cummings retorted dryly. "And so we are continuing the investigation. I want to know the source of his income, so we are checking his tax returns. I want to know how he appeared in Miami without previous trace, so we are checking all ships that put into that port on and before the day of appearance. And checking other Florida ports as well. I want to know what is behind the mysterious coincidence of those dates, so we will continue to investigate him. You stay on the job—stay on him." He sat up and abruptly turned away from the sunlight to lock eyes with the other man. "I have already assigned another investigator to the case. Here."

Dikty said nothing.

"That is no reflection on your ability or your work," Cummings said decisively. "I'm satisfied you have done all that could be done. But I'm also satisfied that the subject is aware of you and aware of the supposedly secret organization you represent. I can see no other way of explaining that taxicab incident. We will bear in mind that his intentions toward you—and us—are friendly, otherwise he would have let you go to your death. Take note that he made no attempt to prevent the deaths of the woman and the cabdriver—only yours. But still, the primary purpose of our organization is to protect our atomic structure against all comers, so he must remain under surveillance. Continue on that basis; meanwhile a new investigator he does *not* know has been moved in. To approach him in a new way. I prefer that you and the new agent do

not know each other—I don't want to run the risk of having the subject link the two of you together. If an occasion should arise when you must reveal identities, you will be cousins."

"My cousin?"

"Yes, that is safe enough. You have no real cousins."

"Very well."

"Our procedure from this point forward will be to determine how the subject knew those various important dates in advance. I'll start Washington digging into the scientific and political circles of 1939 and 1940. Something may come up to connect it all. I hope so."

"I'm sorry, but you are way ahead of me."

"In 1939 and 1940," Cummings sketched the outline for him. "only the President and a *very* tight little knot of scientific and political advisors, knew the United States was speculating in nuclear physics; you know the degree of secrecy maintained on that score. But still, our subject appears in public view for the first known time. In 1942, only the President and a slightly larger group of advisors and planners knew that these Tennessee hills would be the future site of an atomic plant. So, our subject appears here and opens an office—an investigator's office, of all things. Talk about your protective coloration! And finally, about a year and a half ago, an agent of a supersecret security organization barely misses an appointment with death. Again our subject is in the right place at the right time. We find now that he is overly curious of the sciences, follows their discoveries."

"He doesn't seem to age," Dikty said absently.

"How did he know of that historic birth in Washington, in 1940?" Cummings demanded. "How did he know Oak Ridge would be built out here, in 1942? How did he know of your existence—and perhaps mine? Believe me, Dikty, when I say this outfit is tight, I mean *tight*. We don't so much as have an official name—we just exist. And not

all of the President's Cabinet members know of our existence—only a few of them. We don't appear on *any* pay roll; money is secretly siphoned off to us. We aren't responsible to any government agency, only the next man in line above us. And every one of us knows only a small handful of fellow agents. We don't even know who is actually controlling us." Cummings bounded from his chair and stalked to the window, to glare across the intervening blocks at the tall white building down the street. "How did he know of you and why did he save your life?"

Dikty shook his head worriedly. "I can't tell you."

The supervisor's fists were clenched behind his back, knotted in an angry ball. "Has he seen you—since the taxicab incident?"

"I'd like to say no." Dikty was uncomfortable. "I take a deep pride in my training and my job, and under ordinary circumstances I *would* say no, definitely. I've been extremely careful in shadowing him. But considering the unusual abilities of the subject—yes, he has probably spotted me."

Cummings turned back to the open window and stood in the sunshine. His outward anger seemed to have vanished, and when he spoke his voice was soft, silken.

His level eyes sought out the distant office building.

"What's his name again?" Nash asked.

"Gilbert Nash. An assumed name, I suppose."

II

GILBERT NASH was aware of the man's bewildered footsteps wandering along the corridor just outside, was aware of the stranger's hesitancy for several minutes before the man actually paused at the door and put his hand on the knob. The shape of the bewildered man appeared only as a fuzzy haze on the door's frosted glass pane. Gilbert Nash remained in his chair and watched

the indistinct shape, watched to see what it would finally do.

The knob turned suddenly and the man darted in.

He stopped just past the doorway staring at Nash, looking to see what a private detective would be like, looking around the room without actually seeing it, still undecided what to do.

Nash slowly got to his feet. "Come on in. I won't bite you." His voice was low, casual and pleasant; it sounded as though the speaker didn't really care if the stranger entered or not.

The newcomer made a move to push the door shut behind him. "I'm—I came up to see you. My name is—is it quite all right? May I talk?"

Nash nodded, amused. "Quite all right. You are here with a problem. There is the same confidence between a client and myself as between doctor and patient." He reached out a casual hand to half turn an empty chair toward the visitor.

"Come in and sit down."

The man was wearing most of his troubles on his timid face. It needed no second glance to reveal that he wasn't merely having domestic difficulties, he was drowning in the miseries. It was in his walk, in his unconscious slouch as he sank into the proffered chair, it hung from his shoulders like the unpressed coat he wore and it preyed on his mind constantly, spilling out over his face. He failed to see Nash's outstretched hand, may have failed to see the man himself very clearly. He slumped in the chair and ran a moist palm across his forehead, moist from things other than the summer heat.

"I don't want this in the papers," the man said.

Nash smiled politely.

"It won't be. Unless you've murdered someone."

"Oh, heavens, no!" His voice and his body had risen with alarm at the suggestion, and now he slowly dropped back into the chair, forcibly relaxing. "Nothing like that, oh no, nothing. It's my—my name is Gregg Hodgkins. It's



my wife. . . ."

Nash nodded. "Of course"

Hodgkins was well dressed but he wasn't so well pressed. He crushed an expensive straw hat in his hands and occasionally discovered himself worrying his twisted necktie. His eyes were intelligent enough behind their blanket of worry, and his hairline was beginning to recede. He wore a small A-C-T pin in his lapel.

"What about your wife?" Nash prodded gently. "Is she objecting to your work over on the Ridge?"

Hodgkins shot upright with sudden suspicion. "How did you know about that?"

Nash indicated the lapel pin. "I recognize that. I know that the American Chemical Trust runs the plant for the government, and I know that not every employee may wear one of those pins. You're some sort of a scientist out there; I wondered if your wife was objecting to your work."

"Oh . . . yes." Hodgkins fingered the pin absently. "Silly of me not to recognize the public significance of the thing. I'm afraid I'm not thinking very clearly any more. No, it isn't that—isn't my work. My wife, she . . . Mr. Nash, you just *have* to find my wife!"

"Is she lost?"

"She ran away"

"Oh? When?"

"Less than . . . I'd say three weeks ago."

"Why?"

Hodgkin's seemed to grow more miserable. "That's a long story, a very long story."

"All right. I'll listen—I've got all afternoon. You do want to tell me, don't you?"

The scientist sat up stiffly and stared into Nash's probing, yellowed eyes while the words stumbled eagerly out. "Oh, yes, everything—I want to tell you everything, Mr. Nash. I don't know where else to turn. But you probably won't believe me. They didn't."

Gilbert Nash interlaced his fingers and relaxed in the desk chair, seeking

comfort. "Who are they?"

"My doctor, and the company psychiatrist, recommended by the doctor." He jerked out a crumpled handkerchief to swab his face. "I went to my doctor first from force of habit; I grew up in the habit of taking everything to the doctor, and he never failed me before." Hodgkins hesitated only long enough to risk a glance across the desk at Nash. "I could have saved myself the trouble," he added bitterly.

Nash almost folded himself into the chair, seeking the most comfortable position. His eyelids closed and his interlaced fingers were still. "The doctor said perhaps that you were imagining things? That you needed a rest?"

"Yes."

"And the psychiatrist?"

"He agreed with my doctor," Hodgkins continued in the bitter voice. "He sent me home. And I haven't worked for three weeks—that hurts, too. I haven't worked since she left me."

"The psychiatrist?" Nash prodded.

"He said almost the same thing as my doctor but of course stated it in a different manner; a mild neurosis, he told me, cumulative anxiety brought on by my exacting work and the attendant, continual pressures. Oh, he made it sound impressive, but mild and altogether harmless." Hodgkins paused again to look across at Nash. "I can't tell you what my work is."

"I'm not going to ask." He didn't move, didn't open his eyes but the hint of amusement returned to his face.

"Do you know what that silly psychiatrist said to me?" Hodgkins demanded. "He said I would probably be a very happy man in a matriarchal community, but that for the present there was nothing to worry about. And he sent me home from work; he comes around a few times a week to look in on me. Me—a grown man." He hesitated again. "And Mr. Nash, he reassured me that I am reasonably sane, as sane as any man can be in *this* world today. I say that because I can't be sure what you are thinking of me."

"Never mind what I'm thinking. Your work and mine are alike in one respect; I don't form opinions until I've heard the entire story. And if it is any comfort to you, sanity is a legal term, it doesn't properly belong in medical terminology." Nash nodded his head. "Please go on."

"Thank you." Hodgkins exhibited a minute measure of satisfaction. "I need someone who can place faith in me, in what I have to say."

Nash nodded again, still with a faint trace of amusement. "And so you came to me."

"Yes. I read a great deal, both fact and fiction. And in a vicarious way I believe I know the detect—the business of investigation fairly well. I have a healthy respect for your profession. Frankly, Mr. Nash, you are the only remaining person I can turn to." He broke off again to stare intently at the listening man. "Will you do me a very great favor?"

Nash slowly opened his eyes to regard the scientist with speculation. "If I am able—yes."

"Please—" the words were tumbling again, rushed and unsure—"don't laugh at me. Don't laugh at what I'm going to say. I know very well my facts will sound silly and childish, perhaps even fantastic, and under other circumstances I might well laugh myself. But they aren't silly, they are bare, bald *facts*, the only thing I have left to cling to. And I don't want you to laugh, no matter what you choose to believe of me. I don't want you to pat my shoulder and tell me I am imagining things, that I need a long rest, that I would be happy in a matriarchal state." He paused for breath. "If you choose *not* to believe me, tell me so and I'll leave. Refuse me—my case, if you so desire, and stop right there. I'll walk out that door and not bother you again. But, please, don't laugh at me."

Nash nodded assent. "That much is easily granted." He closed his eyes a second time and relaxed in the chair. "Where are you going to begin?"

WITH my wife, with Carolyn. Everything begins with my wife—and ends there. The entire affair seems to be a complete circle of zero, our marriage, our life together; everything comes right back to her and ends where it began." He paused, summoning courage for what he had to say next. "She's too damned smart!"

With that he came to a full stop, looking for a reaction on the part of Nash. There was none. Nash remained curled in the chair, patiently waiting for him to continue.

"Have you ever had the misfortune to marry a woman far more intelligent than yourself, Mr. Nash?"

"No."

Hodgkins rushed on. "But surely you can imagine what a man desires in a woman. It has been said before by men more gifted than myself—an inspired chef in the kitchen, a patient mule about the house, a . . ."

Nash finished for him when he hesitated. Hodgkins resumed:

"Eh—yes. Among other things, the usual and attractive physical attributes, a man wants a smart and very intelligent wife, a woman possessing sufficient mental abilities to understand him and his world. A woman who can stride alongside him, who can understand his problems and to a degree, help him solve them. But still—and this is a paradox, I will admit—a woman who is necessarily inferior to him, just a trifle inferior. A sort of delicate balance to the male ego. For a man also wants a woman who *needs* his advice, who must lean on him, who has need of his greater reasoning powers as well as his mechanical knowledge. That is the kind of woman every healthy man desires, Mr. Nash. I fully believed I had found such a woman in Carolyn."

Nash nodded again, seeing the image of Hodgkin's desired woman on his inner eyelids. He thought he knew what was coming.

"Just how old is your wife, Mr. Hodgkins?"

The question was met with a small

silence, and when the answer finally came it was in an embarrassed tone. "I—we don't know really. She is an orphan you see, and we were unable to locate the birth certificate. The situation stirred up a bit of a fuss when I first took a job with the Manhattan people, as you can imagine. They delve into everything, but they couldn't find a certificate either. Carolyn and I finally agreed that she was about five years younger than myself—that needed bit of inferiority, you must understand."

"I understand. And you are . . . ?"

"Forty-six, now. So by our agreement she would be forty-one—we think. Sometimes I am not sure. She hasn't grown much older since the day I married her."

The yellow eyes snapped open to fasten on him. "What?"

"She never changed much." Hodgkins smiled with the memory of her. "I liked that, really. What man in love doesn't prefer his wife to cling to her youth and beauty? She was a handsome, striking woman on the day we were married, and still is. She could have easily passed herself off as being in the middle twenties then; today, I would judge, she could get by very well indeed in the early thirties. Her youth seemed to cling to her."

"Did she use anything to maintain that youth?" Nash asked curiously.

"What do you mean?"

"Creams, lotions, the usual jars in her bedroom?"

Hodgkins was embarrassed again. "I don't know, Mr. Nash. We had separate bedrooms. Oh—I don't mean by that, that we—well—but we always had separate bedrooms. She wanted it that way." He shrugged. "Offhand, I don't recall seeing such jars around. Carolyn was very tidy—marvelous wife and housekeeper."

"Yes, I can imagine." Nash's gaze lifted above the man's head and climbed the wall, absently speculating.

Hodgkins, unaware that Nash was no longer watching him, began talking about himself, about his schemes and

plans and desires. He told the investigator about the day that strange men approached him on an even stranger subject, and how he found himself working in a concrete cell which was a part of many other cells, the whole making up an organization called the Manhattan Project.

He recounted to Nash his later days, after he was transferred to Oak Ridge and the superior position gained there, recounted the full and fruitful years of labor when his problems were knotty but which almost always seemed to solve themselves with short passages of time. And he told of the slowly growing strain of unhappiness between his wife and himself.

Hodgkins wound up by asserting, "I consider myself an intelligent man, Mr. Nash. You'll grant me that, leaving false modesty aside."

"Easily granted," Nash said again. "But back to your wife . . . ?"

"Yes—Carolyn."

He lapsed into a painful silence while his memory skittered back tracing again the days of his ripening love for her.

"In the evenings after work," he finally broke his silence, "I studied the technical books and journals I could not then afford. Censorship had not become so effective and so widespread until 1940 or shortly thereafter, and one could still find the desired studies in some of the libraries, or could borrow them from some of the universities. Some of those early reports aroused my first active interest in nuclear physics, I remember. The Germans had access to heavy water but didn't quite know what to do about it. Well, anyway—I wanted to climb as rapidly and as safely as possible, and I realized that if I waited until I could afford the publications it might be too late. I had a poor job, and the desire for a brighter future, a future with security and a wife. Then I discovered Carolyn in the library."

"Oddly enough, the first time I saw her she was looking at a schematic drawing in a radio magazine. She was tracing it with her finger. It startled me, and

when I looked closer to discover what she was really doing it pleased me. You must realize it was—and is—a very unusual thing to find a woman interested in such technical details. But she was. Have you ever read a schematic? It is done in two ways: either you have a surface interest in the drawing and you follow each line from origin to terminus, with your interest being in that line alone; or you attempt to grasp the plan as a whole and retain the mental impression of each circuit, enmeshing it with the next circuit as you trace it. The end product is that you have a fairly cohesive picture of the scheme by holding the image of each circuit in your mind, meanwhile interlacing them: all. I stood behind her chair and watched her finger; I don't know that she was reading the drawing as a whole, but I think she was."

"You couldn't judge by her finger?"

"No, of course not. The finger was merely a guidepost to the mind behind it. She went along splendidly for a few moments and then she seemed to run into trouble."

Nash nodded. "Yes, I was expecting that."

"You were? Oh, my. Well—I don't recall at this late date what it was, but some difficulty arose that threw her completely from her train of thought. It may have been my presence behind her. And when you lose the thread of thought in a schematic, Mr. Nash, you may as well begin all over again. She was annoyed."

"I can well understand. Go on."

He did so. "Well, she pushed the magazine away with a little sound under her breath and started to get up. And I, like a damned fool, had to butt in; without thinking of what I was doing, I leaned over her shoulder to point to the trouble spot."

"You did as expected."

"I did?" Hodgkins was uncertain whether to be pleased or confused. "Not *that* way, I remember saying to her impulsively, and then I rather choked up and could say no more. She threw me

one withering glance over her shoulder and I hurriedly left the library, in some confusion I must admit. She had created quite a disturbance within me."

Nash turned his bemused attention to the man. "Was it an act?"

"Do you mean, was she pretending to something false? No, I can't believe that. She was an utter stranger to me that evening and I can't imagine why she would pretend to something, merely to gain my attention. I must remind you, Mr. Nash, that I was nobody at the time. I hadn't even a decent job. My clothing couldn't have been too acceptable." Hodgkins shook his head. "I avoided the library on the next few nights because I still felt some embarrassment over the incident, but less than a week later I had to go back. My studies were suffering—and the overpowering desire to see her again swept away any misgivings I may have had. The desire amounted almost to a pull, a compulsion. The memory of her continued to haunt me, disturb my days and nights, and I realized I could never rest until I was near her once more."

Nash regarded him silently and with calculation. He was beginning to learn vast things about Carolyn Hodgkins.

The physicist said, "I finally returned to the library—"

"—and there she was," Nash finished the sentence for him. "You might say, waiting for you."

"Yes, really!" Hodgkins missed the intended irony. "I found her studying a book that I had turned in only a few weeks before. It dealt with a field closely allied with my own, can you understand that? It had not been easy studying for me, that particular volume, but there she sat almost swimming through it! I was both astonished and delighted! But still, I carefully avoided her that evening, preferring to sit in another part of the room just watching her—her profile was wonderful. Well, eventually I—that is, we—I don't quite know how to explain it," he finished lamely.

"No need to," Nash assured him in what he hoped was a sympathetic rather

than an amused voice. "Easily understandable, it happens all the time. Mutual interest in your sciences, each of you obviously alone . . ." He let it hang there, watching Hodgkins.

"Yes, yes, of course. You do understand. So then I finally summoned the courage to approach her and introduce myself. She was not angry at all, she was most friendly." He closed his eyes for a brief moment of retrospective dream. "In time we became fast friends. We met again at the library several times, and then elsewhere; in a very short while I began entertaining ideas. I surprised myself, Mr. Nash, with the quickness and audacity of those ideas, for until then I had been something of a backward man half afraid of a woman's shadow. But you must understand, Carolyn's presence seemed to invite ideas."

"I'll just bet," Nash mumbled.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Go on with it, please."

"I thought," Hodgkins said after a small pause, "she was—or rather she would be what any intelligent man might call a perfect wife. The woman was beautifully endowed with everything I could possibly ask in a mate, including the remarkable intelligence I had always desired in my dream woman. A hundred enchanting little things came to light about her as we spent many pleasant evenings together. I had fallen in love of course. I still am. And I may as well make this brief, Mr. Nash. We were married." Hodgkins came to a full emotional stop, expecting some reaction to his tale. He got it.

Gilbert Nash stood up from the chair, stretched his arms lazily above his head and took a turn about the little room. He came back to stand beside the window overlooking the street, his back to his client. His voice, when he spoke, held a strange and muffled quality as though he were vocally hiding something.

"Hodgkins, can you stand a jolt?"

"A jolt? Well—I suppose so."

"All right, here it is. Just about any

other man in the world who had his feet on the ground instead of in the air would know what happened to you. Quite plainly and frankly, you were taken in."

"Taken in?"

"Hooked. And if you aren't familiar with current slang, you were baited and trapped in a fine-mesh net. The net was that schematic drawing. But don't be alarmed—" Nash waved a negligent hand—"that happens all the time, too. A million women employ a million ways to catch a million men. Yours was the technical touch. Quite common, Mr. Hodgkins."

Hodgkins stammered, "I see."

"I wonder?" Nash asked under his breath. He remained at the window looking down into the street.

Behind him, half oblivious to any other presence in the room, Hodgkins was tightly wrapped in the warm memories of his wife. He had married Carolyn because he was madly in love with her, overwhelmed with love of her because she had noticed him and had not passed on, had paused to look. He was positive theirs was the greatest love since time's birth, unaware that others without number thought the same. He had married her because he would possess something few other men could boast: an alert woman who was nearly his equal in any field he chose to explore. *Nearly*. He had married her because she could read a schematic drawing *but* encountered trouble on certain parts of it. That iota of necessary inferiority was present. And it had remained—for a time. But somewhere along that golden line between the honeymoon and the ill-fated day three weeks ago, the bubble had burst. Or half burst. He still loved her, if only she would continue to love him. *If*.

Nash turned to find the man slouched in the chair, dreaming his dreams. "Which brings us to the present," he suggested briskly.

"What?" Hodgkins sat up. "Oh, yes—the present."

"You're still married, still in love?"

"Yes."

"But your wife has walked out on you?"

"I'm afraid she has."

"Has this ever happened before?"

"Why—no. Not like this."

"What do you mean, not like this? Has she or hasn't she?"

"I meant to say, she took vacations. Without me. She thought it best, you must understand." He seemed embarrassed. "Carolyn would go away for a time—perhaps a week or so, perhaps a month. She thought we should have separate vacations."

"Where'd she go?"

"Oh, I don't know. I didn't ask."

"And now she has gone again and you want me to find her?" He paused.

"This isn't just another vacation?"

"Not—not this time."

"Are there any other men?"

Hodgkins cringed. "I don't know. I don't think so. I've never seen them."

Nash felt a fleeting moment of wonder at the man's naivete. Gregg Hodgkins—scientist, scholar, valuable enough to be invited into the Manhattan District, naive enough to be roped into marriage by a woman who carefully used his own special knowledge to lure him.

Nash said, "If your wife were only half as smart as you claim, friend, you *still* would not see the other man. You never do, believe me; but in the meantime there are some muddy points in your tale of woe which need clearing up. What was the cause of your separation?"

Hodgkins stared at him, anguish in his eyes. The crisis had been forced upon him with those few words, a crisis he had clumsily tried to avoid all during his recital. Why had he split with Carolyn—or rather, why had she run away from him? The answer was painted on his face and written between the lines he had spoken earlier, but Nash waited for him to spell it out with harsh words.

"Because she had surpassed me!" Hodgkins cried at last, ashamed to admit it.

"Surpassed you?" Nash prodded.

"She is an unimaginable distance ahead of me! No, please—don't mistake me. I'm not mad, not angry. Jealous—yes, I'll admit to that. But I'm not angry at her for what she has done. Carolyn has passed me by! During all the years we have lived together, she sucked my mind of knowledge the way a vampire is said to suck blood."

Nash sat down abruptly to stare at the physicist. "What?"

"Everything I've learned in the past ten years," the man cried, "everything I've gained by hard work and sweat, Carolyn knew the next day! Will you believe me when I say she plucked from me every iota of knowledge I have, pulled it piece by piece from my poor head without uttering a word!"

"Carolyn Hodgkins did that?"

Hodgkins nodded miserably. "Yes."

"Well!" Gilbert Nash exclaimed in mild wonder. "Well—finally."

III

THE corridor outside was fairly quiet. There weren't many offices on the seventh floor, one of the reasons Nash had chosen the location.

He stood at the partly opened window overlooking the city, overlooking the smallish cars and still smaller people crawling the pavement below. The sunlight slanted past, leaving that side of the building and his single window in shade. Nash batted his eyes at the warm, sunlit city and turned about to face the room, his face a mask and his voice a monotone.

"Let's go into that more fully," he suggested.

"About Carolyn?"

Nash nodded. "About Carolyn."

"I warned you—you might laugh at me."

"I'm not laughing," Nash pointed out.

"Well, I've formed a theory."

"I want to hear it," Nash said.

"I'm a careful man—by training and habit. I must be, in my work. I have formed a theory about Carolyn." He looked up, somewhat confused. "But

you must understand I still love her. I do—to this day!”

“You love her. Keep going on the theory.”

“In the beginning I didn’t realize what was taking place; our marriage was too new, Carolyn was too new and I lacked previous data. I don’t recall now when I first suspected the truth. It was one of those years . . . one of those years I discovered that Carolyn was learning my most precious secrets, the most confidential government secrets that we at Manhattan were exploring. Manhattan was very strict, you must understand. *Nothing* was to be carried home to the wife and family, and following those dictates my lips were sealed. Never, never in the many years of our marriage have I spoken a confidential word to my wife—about my work, I mean. Not one word. But in a short while Carolyn knew everything I was doing, and everything I had observed others doing. I worried about it, puzzled over it, told myself I was fabricating false premises—but she *knew*, and in the end I realized that she knew. She would prove that to me when certain instances arose in my work that stopped me cold. I would stand still for days, unable to progress by so much as a single decimal point and she would grow irritated with me. Impatient with me really, for I was holding her back as well. Finally her irritation and impatience would reach the point where she would drop some hint in our idle conversation—not about the work stoppage, no, but she had the knack of inserting an irrelevant phrase or thought into whatever subject we were discussing. That irrelevant something would grow in my mind and in a day or so I would change it—that is, reassign the values, and apply them to the work under consideration. Immediately the problem would vanish, the knot would disappear and the work would go forward once more. And Carolyn’s mood would change for the better. I have included all that in my theory of her.

“Carolyn helped me push my work,

and in return shared the results of that work. Against my will. I puzzled a long, long time over the method she employed to gain access to my knowledge. Mr. Nash, the following is apt to be . . . to be. . . .”

“Confidence of the client, remember? Don’t worry about what it is apt to be. Just spill it.”

“Yes, sir.” Hodgkins fidgeted. “At first—at first I considered mental telepathy, those Rhine experiments with ESP and that sort of thing. I wondered if Carolyn was—say sitting across the room from me and reading my thoughts; and although I blush to admit it, I toyed with that idea for quite some time and would find myself devising mental traps for her. I used to *think* things, sometimes revolting and horrible things—nasty little thoughts—and watch to see if she reacted to my thoughts. She never did, never gave an indication that she was ‘reading’ those thoughts or ‘reading’ my mind. I discarded the theory of mental telepathy. That is, I discarded that particular theory of telepathy. Mr. Nash, I can’t prove what I am about to say, but I believe I have discovered the channel of workable telepathy—at least between Carolyn and myself.”

“I know one thing right now,” Nash told him. “I guessed it by your manner and your growing discomfort. It is a rather delicate channel, isn’t it?”

Hodgkins eyed him in wonder. “Very delicate. I’ve come to believe this telepathy of ours requires a physical contact. A very intimate physical contact.”

“I’m anticipating you. But go on.”

“This—I haven’t even told this to my doctor—but as our years of marriage went by I finally came to realize that we *must* have this physical contact for her to know my innermost thoughts.” He broke off to glance with embarrassment at Nash. “I’m afraid this becomes very personal. I hope you’ll understand. In the beginning of course we were very much in love, always together. But over the course of years that tends to wear away and you experience only periodically what you felt at first.

"It was during this latter period that I formed my theory of Carolyn. We had moved to Oak Ridge by this time. I formed the theory that Carolyn can know my thoughts by physical contact, that her mental powers are limited to that means of conductivity. Let us assume that we were holding hands—when you are in love, Mr. Nash, there is much of that. When we were holding hands, Carolyn could know my surface thoughts, could know what I was thinking of in a vague, distant manner. When we kissed, she was able to plunge deeper, able to read and know everything I knew. I could feel *that*, I could feel her plumbing my mind for knowledge. It amounted almost to a physical probing. I knew what was happening and yet I was powerless to prevent it. I—was and am in love with Carolyn. I couldn't deny her affection.

"But when—" Hodgkins cast a sheepish, half-defiant glare at Nash—"but

when I would return home from work after having solved, or nearly solved, some particularly important problem, Carolyn would be extremely affectionate."

Nash said nothing, waiting.

"As an illustration," Hodgkins continued after a moment, "let me use that schematic drawing I spoke of before. While I would be working my slow way through that drawing, Carolyn would keep pace with me by holding my hand, by kissing me warmly each evening as I came home. She would know each detail and could, if need be, sit down and make a copy of that drawing. All this without a spoken word passing my lips."

He used the soiled handkerchief to mop his face. "And that, Mr. Nash, is my theory. I believe I know how mental telepathy works and I believe I have unwittingly proved it."

Nash shifted his position in the chair.

[Turn page]

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He fastened his penetrating gaze upon Hodgkins. "If you were an archeologist instead of a physicist, that form of telepathy wouldn't have startled you so. Astonished and pleased you—yes, but you would have recognized it."

"I would?"

"Yes. Making allowances for the scanty information available today, there's reason to believe your telepathy was practiced among the Sumerians some five to seven thousand years ago. The art has since become lost."

"Is that a fact? Are you an archeologist?"

"The armchair variety," Nash said. "But you seem to have overlooked the most important point right now. What did your wife *do* with the knowledge she gained from you? What did she do with those government secrets? Pass them along to someone else?"

"I have no idea. I never saw anything suspicious that would suggest such a thing. Do you—do you think Carolyn ran away with a spy?"

"Don't be melodramatic," Nash snapped. "Spies don't run away with anyone—they travel alone. No, she didn't run away with a spy."

Hodgkins melted back into his chair, dejected. "Do you understand the terrible trouble I'm in? I have my convictions and I believe in them. But can I take them to the police? Would they believe me? Would they examine their files for your Sumerians? Can I tell my troubles to the security agents who guard the plant out there? What would that psychiatrist say if I told him all that I have told you? What would happen to me? And think, man—do I want to turn my own wife over to the law, assuming they would believe me?"

Nash shook his head. "Friend, you've got my sympathy. You're in a very clever trap, the most foolproof trap I've ever seen." He interlaced his fingers, staring at the scientist. "You were trapped into marriage, believe me. Baited and trapped by a beautiful woman because of what you would become in the future, not because of what you were then. To

add to your own misfortunes, you fell in love with her. . . ." He paused, let his gaze drift slowly around the walls of the room and then back to the man. "Or maybe you were made to fall in love with her."

"I—don't think I understand."

"I'm not surprised. Few mortals do." Nash paused again, frowning. "You still haven't told me why you and Carolyn separated."

"Why—I was sent home from the plant! That silly psychiatrist prescribed rest. And I was of no use to Carolyn after I had left the Ridge."

Nash considered the answer. "That isn't all of it." He strode to the window.

"I don't know what you mean."

"I think you do. Which happened first, your being sent home, or your wife walking out?"

"They—they both happened on the same day. Carolyn left the same afternoon I came home."

"That's quite interesting. We will assume that she deserted you when she discovered your usefulness was over. But that isn't all. Before that afternoon, what caused your dismissal? Why were you in such a state that the psychiatrist told you to go home?"

"Carolyn."

"Carolyn? What did she do?"

"Nothing obvious. But for weeks she gave every indication of—being finished with me. I gained the distinct impression that she was mentally packing up and preparing to leave. I worried about it, I didn't want to part with her. I suppose I worried myself into such a state that I visited the doctor. And he—you know the rest."

Nash put his forehead to the pane of window glass and looked down. "I know that your wife realized you were finished before you did. The point is, finished in what way? You still have your mental and physical health, you still had an excellent job, and that particular agency of the government doesn't send you to a glue factory when they are done with you. So how and why

were you finished?"

"I can't imagine," Hodgkins answered evasively.

Nash stared at his own close reflection in the window glass. "Perhaps not—and perhaps you can. I want to think of that for a moment. It's highly important that we discover *why* your wife decided you were finished; *why* she prepared to leave you." He fell silent for a moment, musing. "What about your work on the Ridge? Had you just wound up some really important job?"

"Well—yes." Hodgkins grew uneasy.

"Don't worry—I'm not going to pump you."

"Official secrecy, you know," the man said pompously.

Nash turned slowly, not attempting to conceal the scorn in his expression. "Hodgkins, I'm laughing at you now. Not at what you have told me up to this moment; I made a promise and I intend to keep it. But I'm laughing at what you've just said."

The physicist returned his glance, puzzled and ill at ease.

Nash flicked a pointed finger. "There are only two kinds of men in all the world who still believe there are keepable secrets in nuclear physics! One of those men is the blind, awkward and fumbling politician—and we can dismiss him because he suffers his occupational disease. The other man is a jealous researcher."

"But I—"

"But you have so narrowed your mind and your former capacity for intelligent reasoning that you now fall into the second category. You were even startled when I looked at that signboard stuck in your lapel and told you where you worked. Can you comprehend the iron grip that the secrecy fetish has on your mind? Realistic secrecy in nuclear physics is a farce. What did you tell me a while ago about borrowing books and magazines from the library to aid your studies? Do you think men all over the world have forgotten what was printed in them—that tens of thousands of scat-

tered copies were gathered up and burned? Do you actually believe that only your group and your government know how to build weapons? Control all the knowledge?" Nash stabbed out a finger to emphasize his point. "I feel sorry for you, Hodgkins—and all those others who think as you do. You have no secrets."

"Our security people—"

"—are as helpless as all the king's horses and men," Nash finished flatly.

"I've heard it discussed," Hodgkins said.

"You think it an abstract matter? Listen then, while I destroy your religion. Your government long ago invented and put to use an inverted-Y gun for detonating the atomic bomb. One or two years later, Russia developed an inverted-Y gun for detonating the atomic bomb. Less than six months ago, England examined and discarded the principal of an inverted-Y gun for detonating an atomic bomb. Secrecy—hell!"

Hodgkins looked his firm disbelief.

Nash's voice dropped. "A great and pompous to-do is made about the size of the critical mass necessary to detonate that bomb. The people making the greatest fuss are the most deluded." His voice dropped still lower almost to a whisper. "Hodgkins—what would happen in this room, to this building, if I were able to bring together very quickly just twenty-two pounds of pure U-235? Twenty-two point seven pounds, to be exact?"

He waited for an answer but there was none. The physicist stared numbly at his hands lying limp in his lap.

"I didn't obtain that information by stealth or trickery," Nash declared. "And you can tell your security agents about me, if you like. When they come trooping in here I'll show them where it was published, chapter and verse." He moved away from the desk to pace the room. "I can also tell you the present sizes of the bomb casings, as opposed to that ungainly giant dropped on Hiroshima—surely you recall that it was necessary to gouge out the interior of a

plane to house that one. And I know—if you don't—that an inglorious thing like a three-dollar alarm clock was the timing device in that first bomb. Today they are using frequency impulses. Now will you believe me—there are no real secrets?”

“I can't—tell you anything. I have sworn.”

“All right,” Nash said in resignation, “keep your oath if it will help you keep your sanity. I'll tell you.”

He went back to the window to place his forehead against the cool glass. Hodgkins glanced up briefly, stared at the back of his neck and dropped his eyes again.

“I think your wife left you for two reasons,” Nash began. “And I think she knew you were finished in more ways than one. First and foremost, she knew you had finished the very important work you were doing on the Ridge. What could that work be? The major restrictions of the place were dropped in 1949 and now the public runs through the town as if it were a railroad station. Other plants in other places have seized the initiative and Oak Ridge could be compared to a ghost town.” The tall man turned his back to the window and settled his gaze on Hodgkins.

“Today, places like Hanford and Brookhaven and the Savannah River are the stars—while Oak Ridge is supposedly a has-been. Actually it isn't—you are still there, or were up until three weeks ago, working on a highly important matter. What is so important in nuclear physics these days to keep you at Oak Ridge?”

Hodgkins did not look up.

“It might be a reaction motor,” Nash said softly, watching the other's half-averted face. “They're installing one in that submarine over on the East Coast. And one of the electrical companies up north is attempting to build a plane on a similar principle.” He paused again, waiting a few seconds for the effect. “It might be an atomic drive for another type of vehicle—a stepchild of the submarine.” Hodgkins had moved. Nash

watched him. “It might be a heavy-duty reaction motor, designed to fit into a special kind of ship with a special kind of problem to overcome.” The scientist was becoming nervous. “It *could* be a small-scale pile capable of developing a tremendous kick—something, say, which would drive the children of the *Wac Corporal* into space.”

Nash whirled to the window, suddenly satisfied with the results of his probing. That last shot had told.

“As a matter of fact,” he continued calmly, “the Army's *Wac Corporal* and the *V-2* as well as the Navy's *Viking* are dodoes; they are the has-beens that Oak Ridge is supposed to be. The Army passed them by long ago—what was the date? I think it was in February, 1949, that man first jumped into space. Remember that, Hodgkins? Remember the *V-2* that carried the *Corporal* toward space? The *V-2* managed a hundred miles before it fell back, but meanwhile the *Corporal* had leaped from its nose and continued on for another hundred and fifty miles. A total of two hundred and fifty miles off the earth, Hodgkins! The *Wac Corporal* reached empty space. But what have they done since then? How many hundreds of miles more have they gone?” He turned on the physicist eagerly, demanding. “Has Heinlein reached the moon? Has he made the big jump? And in what year of the future will the Army get around to announcing it?”

“I—don't know,” Hodgkins told him slowly.

“No, I suppose you don't. The secret must be kept at all costs.” He lapsed into silence.

For long minutes there was no sound in the room but the curiously loud ticking of a watch somewhere in Hodgkins's clothing. Down the corridor an elevator door clanged.

“Uh—about Carolyn.”

“Yes, we still must face the problem of your missing wife,” Nash sighed and his body relaxed. “We can safely assume we know *one* of the reasons why she left you. Once she learned all there

was to know about your latest work, learned the type of vessel for which it was designed, your usefulness to her was nearly over. I'm not saying that she couldn't have continued to live with you, couldn't have continued to pry out your trade secrets. She could have stayed. But she didn't. That is the most important, and I want very much to know why she didn't stay."

"I'm very glad you understand," Hodgkins said wearily. "I didn't know where else to turn."

Nash looked down on him curiously. "You want me to find her, I take it—to attempt a reconciliation?"

"Anything, Mr. Nash, just anything at all! I want to see Carolyn again, to touch her, to talk to her. I'm miserable without her and I want her to know it—if she will consent to see me again if only for a little while. I want her near me, I want to persuade her to come home."

"How do you know she is still in town?"

"I just think so—I sort of sense her presence. I saw her once, you know, just once about a week ago. She was entering a hotel. I ran after her but she was gone. The man at the desk threatened to have me arrested for creating a disturbance."

Nash pushed a pencil and paper across the desk to him. "Write down her description—make it complete. The date you last saw her, the clothes she was wearing, the clothes she took with her when she moved out. How much money did she have: did she have a separate bank account? Can she drive a car; does she have one? The names of her friends, if any. The name of the beauty shop she patronized, the stores where she usually bought her clothes. Did she have a checking or charge account? Put it all down—everything you think of."

Hodgkins held the pencil in a tight grasp, staring at Nash.

"What's the matter?" Nash asked.

"There is one thing about her description . . ."

"What?"

"Her eyes are yellow—like yours."

"Put it down," Nash replied. He studied the scientist closely as the man bent over the pencil.

There was still something here which lacked an answer. Perhaps Hodgkins himself wasn't aware of it, couldn't tell it. He seemed alert enough within the bounds of his own profession, but he was woefully ignorant in other matters. The woman (and a hidden confederate, perhaps?) had skillfully trapped him into marriage and then patiently waited for the jackpot to pay off. Three weeks ago it had paid off.

She had abandoned him now, not after failure but on the threshold of his success. Why?

Not because of his emotional breakdown. She herself had caused his growing anxiety long weeks before the breakdown and the dismissal. But why? And that long thirst for information, the continual prying in a field far outside the usual woman's world—that was to be remarked. It revealed much of Carolyn Hodgkins. He didn't need the man's information to know that Carolyn Hodgkins too had yellow eyes. It was her thirst for information that revealed her to him. Nash held a brief moment of genuine pity for Hodgkins.

But there remained the enigmatic missing factor. Why had Carolyn Hodgkins abandoned a first-class information carrier? And long before his usefulness was over, reasonably long before his latest work could be put to a practical use? If he had finished that work some three weeks ago, the children of the *Wac Corporal* could not leap into space today or tomorrow.

Nash shook his head.

Hodgkins pushed the paper back across the desk. "I'm afraid that's the best I can do. It is strange how few details of a woman's dress you can remember—when you have to."

"Good enough." Nash studied the neat handwriting. "Did your wife have any hobbies? Collect anything—stamps, coins, anything? Bric-a-brac, maybe?"

"No, not that I recall. Oh, she did

have a bull." Hodgkins closed his eyes, picturing it.

"Bull?"

"A toy of some sort, I think. Stood about six inches high; I thought it was a china bull but it was made of some unbreakable material. She kept it in her bedroom. Do you mean to tell me you can make deductions from that?"

NASH shrugged. "You never know. People don't abandon hobbies and habits when they change their lives. I wonder if I could drop out to the house some evening . . . ? Look around, get the feel of the place? I might be able to find something you'd never think of."

"Why—certainly. I'd be pleased to have you. You can find my number in the phone book."

"Will do—soon. I'd like to talk to you in your own home; maybe the familiar surroundings will help to relieve your nervousness. And I may have something to report."

"Is there anything else, Mr. Nash?"

"No." Nash put out his hand, clasped that of the bewildered scientist. "Leave the rest to me. If she can be found, I'll find her. If she can be persuaded to see you again, I'll bring her or arrange a meeting place. If she refuses, I'll deliver her answer with the reasons why." He fought to hold his face still and his eyes expressionless. "I can't promise you what kind of a result I'll get, but it will be a definite one. And in the meantime I'm going to give you the same advice that psychiatrist gave, but with a difference. Stay home and get some rest. Get quietly drunk if you want to." He broke the handclasp.

And then the physicist was gone. Nash could hear his hesitant steps wandering toward the elevator.

Nash leaned against the door. Beads of sweat stood out on his skin.

He realized that Hodgkins had no idea what kind of ship was to use his power supply.

And he knew with certainty why Hodgkins's wife had run out on him, three weeks before.

IV

DIKTY approached his morning routine with a cold pipe and still colder thoughts. He felt old and washed out. The morning was cloudy and damp with promise of rain to come, and that served only to increase his irritation. He couldn't remember when it had been necessary to apologize to his wife before, but he had done so this morning. He hadn't realized he was talking so roughly, so thoughtlessly. And he might as well admit it—he was getting old for the job; he could no longer stay up all night and feel human the next day. This was a job for younger men.

His was a second-floor office, consisting of two plain rooms tucked away at the back of the corridor. The solid, metal-sheathed door opening into the first room bore a number, nothing else.

Shirley Hoffman waited behind her typewriter, doing nothing. She looked up brightly as he came in.

"Good morning, Mr. Dikty."

Hoffman moved from behind her desk. "The telephone operator tells me that Washington has been calling. They'll call again at nine-thirty." She snapped the lock on the metal-covered door.

Dikty studied the phone. "Cummings has my telegram, apparently. He doesn't like it either." He stalked across the room into the inner office, the girl trailing after him. Dikty seated himself and stared moodily through the window at the dullish sky.

"Hoffman," he said tiredly, "this is for Cummings. It concerns an Oak Ridge man plus the subject under previous discussion." He pointed the pipe-stem at her notebook.

"Gregg Hodgkins, age forty-six, married, owning a home at 2334 North Ridge Drive. No children, no near relatives. Now—Until three weeks ago, Hodgkins was a competent and dependable nuclear physicist employed on a special and hurry-up project at Oak Ridge." Dikty paused to collect a memory. "Hodgkins was working on Code four-four-seven, sharing co-responsibil-

ity for leadership on same. For some six or seven weeks prior to the particular date three weeks ago, Hodgkins exhibited growing signs of nervousness, mental fatigue and possibly instability. This was noted, but his co-leader and several of his fellow workers on the project all exhibited similar nervousness, leading authorities to believe that all were sharing the same anxiety over the ultimate success or failure of the experiment.

"Code four-four-seven was completed successfully and all men concerned with the thing reverted back to their normal selves with varying degrees of rapidity, except Hodgkins who visited his family doctor. The doctor assured him that he was a healthy man, physically, and sent him to the plant psychiatrist."

Dikty lifted the pipe to his mouth, discovered that the glow had died, and applied a second match.

"Montgomery, the psychiatrist, reports a similar story. Hodgkins told him of his difficulties at home and his belief that his wife now outranked him in intelligence quotient. He explained how, in recent years, he had become dissatisfied with their marriage because, as he put it, his wife continued to gain intelligence at a rate exceeding his. This condition eventually unnerved him, coupled to the strain connected with Code four-four-seven.

"Pending further study of the case, the psychiatrist sent him home and Hodgkins's wife deserted him on the same day. After two weeks of continued study, the psychiatrist made a recommendation that Hodgkins be permanently dismissed from government service—although that recommendation was not made known to him. In addition, the usual shadow was assigned to him to determine if he could hold his silence.

"Meanwhile, the wife had moved into the May Hotel here; but moved out again several days later when she discovered that he had followed her and created a scene at the desk. The wife's present location is unknown to me. She left no forwarding address. Nothing

more happened until yesterday.

"Yesterday morning Hodgkins called upon our subject—the subject under previous discussion and investigation. I am totally unable to discover what went on between them. In regards this failure, I decided to wire the subject's office for sound and have taken steps to plant several microphones there. I regret that I did not do so earlier.

"As to Hodgkins' visit to subject, I am unable to decide which of two reasons is the probable one. Fresh in mind is the McKeown case of some time back; Hodgkins may have decided to sell his information, but if this be true, how he became acquainted with our subject and what led him to believe the subject was interested in buying, I do not know. As mentioned in previous conversations, I have no knowledge or suspicion that subject is purchasing information.

"I am inclined to think that Hodgkins visited the subject for a more obvious reason. Considering the subject's advertised profession, Hodgkins' recent separation from his wife and his subsequent failure to meet her again, only one fact prevents me from leaping to that rather obvious conclusion. The fact that the coincidences involved are far too numerous and too startling. Are we to assume that this is but another one?"

Dikty turned slightly in his chair to waggle the pipestem at the girl. "And Hoffman, if you haven't discovered by this time the identity of the subject we are discussing, you may as well kiss your career goodbye." He studied her for a brief moment, the lines of weariness standing out on his face. "On the other hand, if you admit to being nosey and mention his name aloud, you can also kiss it good-bye."

His eyes went back to the window and the threatening sky. "Let's get back. After leaving the subject's office, Hodgkins again wandered aimlessly through the streets for several hours and finally entered a secondhand shop where he attempted to purchase a revolver. The proprietor refused to sell him a weapon, explaining that first he must obtain a

police permit to carry a weapon. Hodgkins told the proprietor he would obtain one, and picked out a gun, asking the proprietor to lay it aside until he returned. The proprietor did so. Hodgkins then left the shop and did not return.

"He next visited a sporting goods store and again attempted to buy a revolver, again being told that a permit was necessary before they could sell him the weapon. Hodgkins repeated the earlier procedure of choosing a gun and the store clerk set it aside for him. The shadow reports that both shopkeepers were in no way suspicious and that Hodgkins exhibited a calm, friendly manner at all times. After these two attempts, Hodgkins purchased one copy of each of several newspapers available at a corner stand and retired to a small restaurant. He read them all thoroughly. Apparently Hodgkins was searching for some particular item.

"He finally discarded the papers and took a taxi to his home, remaining there the rest of the day and evening." Dikty paused to examine the ash in his pipe. "And I wish I could do the same."

A roll of heavy thunder followed his words. "I wish I knew what it was he was looking for in the papers," Dikty mused.

"The personal advertisements—no, he read them quite thoroughly, didn't he?"

"He did. He was searching for news of some nature."

"Something the subject planted in his mind?"

Dikty made as if to answer and then paused. "Yes," he said after a moment. "It could be."

The telephone rang. He consulted his watch. Hoffman answered the instrument, nodded, and handed it to him.

"Dikty, here." A pause. "Yes, he did. Shortly after midnight last night. No, not yet. They are searching." Another and longer pause. "I am, constantly. Subject has made no move. The occurrence hasn't yet appeared in the local papers. It will tonight." Another pause. "Oak Ridge will issue the explanation.

Yes, probably. You what . . . ?" There was a long period of silence in the office. "I'm making out a detailed report now. It will be in your hands in the morning. Hodgkins and our subject made personal contact, rather suddenly. Sought him out, yes. Yes, I think that too. All right." One final pause. "I will." And he hung up.

Hoffman waited expectantly.

Dikty swung back to the girl. "The new operative is on the job, but hasn't yet reported in. Apparently he still doesn't know what happened last night." He pointed to the notebook with a stained pipestem.

"At ten minutes past twelve last night, a neighbor at 2336 North Ridge Drive telephoned the police, reporting that she had heard a noise next door resembling a gunshot. The police arrived at twelve sixteen to find the house dark and locked; after some wasted minutes they gained entrance by forcing the kitchen door. Hodgkins was discovered dead in his wife's bedroom, stretched across the bed.

"The man was shot through the head from front to back, the gun being placed in the open mouth and fired. It was a .32-caliber Smith and Wesson and was found on the floor near the body. The weapon was well oiled and of course contained no prints whatsoever. Police immediately made skin tests of deceased's fingers and found slight traces of oil but none of burned powder."

"Dead," the girl said in a small voice.

"Very dead," Dikty agreed.

Hoffman repressed a shudder. "What does that last mean? Oil and powder stains?"

"A well-oiled gun will not retain fingerprints, fiction to the contrary. Oil stains on Hodgkins's fingers indicate he handled the weapon, but the lack of powder stains indicates he did not fire it. We'll have to await an expert's opinion; it's out of my field. I believe they have some sort of iodine vapor treatment to develop hidden stains and prints and so forth. Well—here's the rest of it.

"Police searched the house and found

oil spots on certain items of Hodgkins' clean clothing in a drawer, leading them at first to believe he had hidden the gun there. In the light of subsequent disclosures mentioned above, they now believe he did not possess a gun and was murdered by the assailant's weapon. Assailant of course did not know that Hodgkins had twice attempted and failed to purchase a gun earlier that day; therefore the planting of oil spots and leaving the gun on the scene to suggest suicide were patently false.

"Meanwhile the assigned shadow, waiting in a car near by, reported that to the best of his knowledge no one entered or left the house. He heard the shot but decided against entering for fear the police would discover him there, and because his routine instructions did not cover such emergency action. Oak Ridge has not seen fit to notify the police that the shadow was near by or even to reveal his existence, or the reason he was trailing the deceased, believing it can add nothing to the case.

"Police are seeking Hodgkins' widow for information. So am I. I'm attending the funeral tomorrow to see who might turn up. End of report."

Outside, the rain began to come down. Dikty glowered at it.

Shirley followed his glance to the window and watched the rain for long minutes before asking, "The widow?"

"Not in my book."

"But definitely not suicide?"

"No."

"I can read the thoughts on your face," Shirley told him.

"Can you, now? Do you also see his name there?"

"You told me never to mention his name aloud."

V

GILBERT NASH waited motionless in the rainswept darkness, a tall and lonely figure unseen and unsuspected in the drenched night. His eyes were focused on the house.

Nash waited, his eyes watching for

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movement and his thoughts turned inward upon Hodgkins and the place he called home up until twenty-four hours ago. Hodgkins had left home. He had briefly seen the man again that afternoon, seen the remains; the mortician had worked minor miracles on a face which had been troubled, on a skull which only half existed.

There were many things an eulogist might say on behalf of Gregg Hodgkins, but two of his outstanding discoveries had small chance of being mentioned. Physicist Hodgkins had helped to discover the means of pushing the offspring of the *Wac Corporal* into space—not that battered old pioneer itself—liquid fuel had done that, but those others which had quickly followed the *Corporal's* last astonishing flight. For that Hodgkins deserved at least a small monument.

On its final trip the *Corporal* hadn't fallen back to earth, it was still up there,

out there, in some dark uncharted place. Space travelers might unexpectedly stumble across it someday, lost and forgotten. And then those three other little ships had quickly followed, the *Heinlein I, II and III*, each powered with early, inadequate applications of Hodgkins's discoveries. Unfortunately he did not live to see the flowering of his final atomic seed.

Nash shifted his position, easing back out of the rain.

Hodgkins the husband had discovered another thing—or, more accurately, had rediscovered a lost property although he did not recognize it as such. With his wife's unwitting and possibly unwilling assistance, he had revived a lost art almost as old as humanity. While the Rhine and allied experimenters continued their investigations into mental telepathy over a distance or through barriers with varying haphazard results, Hodgkins stumbled over the proper application and unknowingly revived it for a minute in time. He couldn't know that his system of thought transference was practiced as long ago as the Akkad Dynasty—some seven thousand years before his birth. He had no knowledge that the "mental telepathy" occurring between himself and his wife was a part of the lives of the ancient Sumerians, had become lost the first time in that same long ago age, had reappeared briefly during the Third Dynasty of Ur, only to vanish again. Present-day scholars knew there were many things the Sumerians began that still survived in the world today; people avoided black cats, not knowing a superstition more than five thousand years old was responsible.

Present-day scholars of the conservative school had nothing but derisive laughter for the notion that the ancients sometimes practiced "mental telepathy," but the unhappy scientist had found himself living a revival of that old Akkad-Sumerian art.

Hodgkins hadn't lived long enough to properly exploit his discovery. If he would be allowed to exploit it . . .

NASH left his protected position and advanced on the house.

The police had boarded up the broken window in the kitchen door with a thin sheet of plywood, had locked the door again and taken the key with them. Nash moved softly across the tiny porch and put his weight to the door. It was solid and unyielding. He placed his hands against one corner of the plywood and pressed in, gently easing the nails free of their grip. When a small space had been opened he reached through and turned the knob from the inside. The door opened to him. He stepped silently into the dark kitchen and closed the door behind him. The house smelled of stale cigars, of musty unclean odors.

Nash waited there for a long moment, probing the blackened silence of the dead house, imagining that he could almost feel the past presence of the scientist. Hodgkins's personality still clung to the darkened interior, clashing somehow with the stale smoke of the recent intruders. There was nothing to suggest Mrs. Hodgkins had ever been there.

He wondered if she had known the eerie, haunting shock he'd felt when he shook hands with her husband? Had that shock struck her suddenly as it had hit him, or had it grown with a quiet intensity over a period of months, causing her to become slowly aware of impending events? That one final handclasp had told him quite clearly why Carolyn Hodgkins deserted her husband. She was about to become a widow. And for some reason she did not care to be at home when the state of widowhood arrived.

Nash moved out of the kitchen to explore the house, shielding the flashlight's beam with his hand.

First a bathroom and then a bedroom met his inquiring eye—Hodgkins's bedroom, as he determined after a few minutes examination. The man's clothing still hung in the closet, carelessly crumpled. The dresser drawers had been left hanging open after the visit of the police, and Nash abandoned any hope of finding the clothing containing the oil

spots. To judge by the marks in the dust, a large picture had been removed from the dressertop—Carolyn's picture, undoubtedly, taken along by the police to aid them in their search.

TRACES of white powder clung to every surface; the police never bothered to clean up their fingerprinting paraphernalia behind them. Nash slipped his hands into his pockets and gave the room a last glance.

He walked through the adjoining bath into another room, quite evidently her bedroom. The mattress was bare, the bedclothing gone—to the police station, the laundry or the incinerator. Nash paused beside the bed to examine the mattress and the dull bloodstain, to judge how the body had sprawled across it. He failed to draw a clear-cut, logical image. Hodgkins would probably have been standing beside the bed if he was murdered; lying on it if he killed himself. The bloodstain gave no hint.

He moved around the bedroom, looking for traces of the departed woman, peering at the dust along the window sills and under the bed. The vanity drawers were empty of everything but a fine layer of dust and a few overlooked hairpins. He picked up one of those, held it close to the beam of the tiny flashlight he carried. It imparted nothing but he dropped it into his pocket. The room contained nothing more of Carolyn Hodgkins, but he remained for many minutes searching for an impression, for an indefinable something that might suggest she had once dwelt there. Nothing.

He sighed his disappointment and at last walked through the other rooms of the house, rooms that had no real interest to him.

Nash seated himself in one of the overstuffed chairs beside a cold fireplace, laced his fingers together beneath his chin and contemplated the darkness.

He thought he understood Hodgkins's love for his wife—only partially. He still couldn't decide if that love affair had

been genuine, or had been carefully planted in the man. Whatever it had been, it was real enough to Hodgkins. He had fallen hopelessly in love, and had continued to love hopelessly until the hour and minute of his death.

Why had he wanted a gun?

To kill Carolyn? Quite possible. Who else would be a likely candidate in Hodgkins's small circle of friends and business acquaintances? *Quick thought:* had the physicist intended to kill him? For what possible reason? Because he and the missing wife had eyes of similar color? Suspicions aroused?

Consider that.

The drumming rain beat against the side of the house.

Hodgkins hadn't been deranged—the doctor and the plant psychiatrist would have known that. But the man had been bathed in misery and despair; he may have intended killing any one of the three of them—or more than one. Wife, investigator, himself, which? There always remained the possibility he might have sought the gun for protection—against something unknown. *Was* there still a third party forming a triangle to the Hodgkins marriage?

Carolyn Hodgkins had known what was about to happen and had deserted the husband before she could become entangled in it. And *he* himself had discovered the approaching death when he shook hands with Hodgkins in the office. A man's future, like his present, like his past, is written on his mind and waiting to be read or lived. Hodgkins had no future. His wife had discovered that and vanished. Even *he*, a stranger, had foreseen the shortness of Hodgkins's future, the imminent blank ending of the conscious mind during that brief hand-clasp as the scientist left the office.

But was there a third party lurking somewhere close?

NASH stiffened in the chair, chopping off his thoughts as the minute sound carried to him from the kitchen door.

There was the gentle forcing of the plywood such as he had done, and a mo-

ment later the knob turned to let the door swing quietly inward. The intruder paused a moment in the kitchen, again as he had done. He wondered if his own presence could be sensed. Again a tiny sound as the door was closed and then soft, cautious footsteps creeping across the kitchen floor. The footsteps hesitated in the blackness of the place and finally a small light flashed out, picking out the bedroom door in bold relief. Carolyn's bedroom.

Nash relaxed in the chair with a self-satisfied grin and let the footsteps go their way.

The newcomer poked about, flashing the light carelessly. Twice the sounds came to a full and breathless stop. Once as the prowler paused beside the bed and caught sight of the bloodstain, and again at the door leading to the bath and opposite bedroom. Nash listened intently. There was the low, secretive rattle of the key being withdrawn from the lock, and then the snap of purse clasps. The intruder then continued on into Hodgkins's bedroom and repeated the search, only to emerge into the living room after a long and thoughtful interval. The pleasant odor of her perfume arrived with her.

Nash unlaced his fingers from beneath his chin but didn't stir in the comfortable chair. Before she could see him and be unduly frightened, he spoke quietly.

"Hello."

Her gasp was almost a scream, half smothered and quickly choked off as she remembered where she was. Again, her light stabbed out, spotlighting him in the chair.

"Better put that out," he advised her. "Neighbors might see it."

The light blinked off.

"There isn't much to be found," he continued in a conversational tone, striving to put her at ease. "I imagine the police have removed most of it."

She sucked in her breath and started again. "I want to know what you are doing here!" The voice was small and strained, still frightened at discovering him.

"Don't you believe that I would come here to meditate? The house was fairly quiet, until you came barging in."

She hesitated. "What is your interest in . . . ?"

"Come now, let's not be naïve as well as noisy."

She said nothing to that, standing across the room and peering at him. "I notice," he said casually, "that you haven't asked my name, who I am. You must know me."

"I've seen you," was the grudging admission.

"How nice." He smiled. "And may I see you?"

"No! Don't move."

"But why not? I'm quite sure you are an attractive woman; you have an attractive voice, and I like the perfume."

"Never mind that." A measure of self-control was returning to her voice. "I still want to know what you are doing here!"

"I was searching the place, as you have."

"In that chair?" she asked derisively.

"I had come to the end of my search—as empty-handed as you. And so I sat down to meditate."

"What were you meditating?"

He laughed. "My thoughts are my own, free and untaxed. You are the most inquisitive person I've met in a long time. Please tell me who you are?"

"No."

"I'll find out for myself."

There was a catch to her breath. "How . . . ?"

"I'll remember your voice, your perfume," he said chidingly. "I'll remember the way you walk. But I shall always remember your voice, even when it has lost its overtones of fright." He laughed again. "I'd like to become better acquainted with the voice. Oh, I'll find you."

"And then?" she asked.

He smiled to himself in the darkness; she really wanted to hear the answer. "It depends upon the time, and the place. I may buy you a drink or a dinner, may ask you to dance or come in and see my

butterfly collection. Or I may ask you to remove your hat because you're obstructing the picture. We'll meet," he promised.

"Did—" She paused to rephrase the question. "Didn't you find anything? There is nothing in the house?"

"I found a hairpin," he acknowledged. "I have it here in my pocket. If you'd like one there are more in the vanity drawer."

She was obviously astonished. "What in the world do you want with a hairpin?"

"Oh—keep it. Perhaps try to match it to those you wear in your hair when I find you again. I don't know." He peered at her dim figure, wishing he could see her face more clearly. "I may even twist it out of shape—say fashion it into the horns of a bull, hold it over a flame." He was suddenly tense, awaiting her reaction.

The room was enveloped in silence with the two people regarding one another as duelists, each struggling to see the other better in the almost nonexistent light.

Her question was a taut whisper. "Who are you?"

"Not at all what I seem," he answered cheerfully, now suddenly relaxed. "And if I may suggest, much like you in that respect."

"But who are you?" she repeated insistently.

"Gilbert Nash," he said. "Hours from nine until four." He glanced around the darkened room. "Special hours of meditation by appointment."

"Stop being silly. You know what I mean!"

Nash shrugged, forgetting she could not see him. "You wouldn't tell me your name. So . . ."

She said slowly, "I could make you tell."

He peered at her, amused. "I doubt it."

"Hodgkins visited you, didn't he? In your office?"

"Yes, he did. And don't bother asking the next question because I won't tell

you the answer."

Again she said, slowly and suggestively, "I could make you tell me."

Nash dryly repeated his doubt, and added as an afterthought, "I'm not like Hodgkins."

"You seem damned sure of yourself!"

"And you," he countered, "like so many women, seem to believe that one thing will open all doors."

"I think I could *hate* you."

"It's only a surface thought, dear girl. I'm really a lovable character. You can't afford to hate me—not in your present position. But go home and have a good cry if it will help." He sat up in the chair and stretched. "I suggest we both go home—we've been here far too long. Neither of us wants to be found here." He made as if to rise.

"Don't move," she warned quickly.

"All right," he agreed, "not until after you leave. But please start leaving, will you? I've lived too long to want to be shot now." He put out a hand. "Shake hands before you go—bosom buddies and all that?"

"No!"

She slowly edged along the wall, inching her way toward the kitchen door. Nash remained seated, following her cautious movements with a speculative gleam. The girl backed up to the door and fumbled with the doorknob; it swung open but she hesitated a moment, one hand on the knob.

"I'll find you," Nash called after her.

She was gone, leaving the door hanging open.

Nash left his chair and leaped across the silent room to stare through the open doorway at the rain.

"That certainly wasn't Carolyn Hodgkins," he said with satisfaction.

GREGG HODGKINS'S funeral the following afternoon was a small, poorly attended affair for a man who had helped hurl at least three tiny ships into space.

Clustered together in a corner of the mortuary parlor were a knot of men who had known him and worked with him at

Oak Ridge. Scarcely a dozen in all. So much for fame, for a genuine contribution to human progress.

There was still another man who sat apart and continually glanced at his watch—Hodgkins's doctor, Nash guessed. And there were two men who kept themselves carefully separated from each other, who tried to act as though they didn't know the other. Independently they swung around to stare at Nash as he walked in. They might as well have worn blue uniforms.

There was one other person in the room—a young woman. She sat quietly still, listening to the sermon.

Nash deliberately seated himself near her, choosing a chair slightly behind hers that he might study her much the same as the two policemen were now studying him. She did not match the description of Carolyn Hodgkins. He could not see her face clearly; she hadn't turned around when he entered the room, hadn't turned when he sat behind her. She *was* aware of him. He knew that by the sudden rigidity of her body, by the way she held her head and kept her attention on the minister. But this was not Carolyn Hodgkins.

Who then?

Near the end of the sermon, Nash both felt and heard someone else come into the room. Someone who took a chair near the door. It seemed to be a man, judging by the heaviness with which he seated himself, and after a few moments Nash copied the plainclothesmen by turning to look.

The government man, Dikty, was staring at him.

Nash gave him the briefest of nods, which was as briefly returned, and then both of them returned their attention to the proceedings. Nash contented himself by staring at the back of the girl's neck, waiting for the long sermon to end.

AFTERWARD he stood outside the mortuary, waiting for the girl to pass by. A group of silent Oak Ridge men came out and moved down the sidewalk. Then the two plainclothesmen

emerged from the door, fixed him with twin stares, and purposely approached him. He guessed instantly that Dikty had sent them.

"Nash?" one of the men asked.

"Yes."

"We sort of wondered why you came down?"

"Hodgkins? Well—he was my client, for a time."

"How long a time?"

"Something like ten or twelve hours."

Nash studied their faces, seeking a hint as to their intentions.

"What did he want with you?"

"Asked me to locate his wife."

"That all?" the policeman asked suspiciously.

"That's all."

"It wasn't nothing to do with his job?"

"Absolutely not." Nash was emphatic.

"We could take you in for questioning you know."

Nash nodded. "Yes, you could."

"We could have your license."

"Yes, you could do that too."

The two policemen were studying him now. "It don't seem to worry you none."

"Friend, it doesn't bother me at all. I have a clean record, and nothing has passed between Hodgkins and myself that you could hang a complaint on. Still—I know that you could revoke the license on some excuse or other, if you decided to. But it's not very important."

"Whaddya mean by that crack? Without a license you can't do business."

"I haven't had enough business in the last year to fill a thimble; do as you please. I don't have much use for it any more."

The second man spoke up with a new suspicion. "Are you thinking of moving?"

"I had considered it—yes."

"Where to?"

"I don't know. North, south, east, west—I don't know." He smiled blandly at the pair. "There isn't much for me to do in Knoxville any more."

The pair of officers lapsed into impa-

tient silence, waiting for further questions to suggest themselves. Nash looked over their shoulders as the girl stepped out into the warm sunlight. She stopped just past the door to glance at Dikty, and then down the walk to where he waited with the police. Her eyes widened.

They were soft, dark brown eyes he noticed, almost the color of her smoothly brushed hair. Beside her, Dikty had turned his head to sniff curiously. The girl hesitated but a second longer and then advanced along the walk, alone. She passed by the silent trio.

That would be Dikty's secretary. Shirley Hoffman was wearing a new perfume; Dikty had noted it and absently turned to sample the scent. She had recognized him standing there with the plainclothesmen and he had recognized her. She had changed perfumes but she wouldn't be able to change her voice.

Shirley Hoffman had been easy to find again.

Nash smiled after her.

VI

THE hotels were blanks. Carolyn Hodgkins was no bungling amateur, that was obvious.

Nash clasped his fingers beneath his chin, propped his elbows on the desk and considered her problem.

There were not too many places she *could* go that would be profitable to her; only Oak Ridge, Hanford, perhaps Brookhaven and the Savannah River. That last brought a frown of speculation. Savannah River was processing heavy water. Or consider Los Alamos; Los Alamos might serve if she could sufficiently camouflage her real intentions, could present an acceptable reason for moving there.

And she was interested in the same object as he, but with a vastly different end in view. In all likelihood that object would be fired from White Sands or perhaps Frenchman's Flats; it and similar objects would go pounding up into the sky, some to fall back failures, some to vanish forever beyond sight and

sound. Those three experimental craft that had already done so were but pilots to the pilots—the real pilots were yet to come, powered with the nuclear magic Hodgkins had almost given his sanity for, that space-happy young men would undoubtedly give their lives for. Already, he knew, mice and monkeys and even a goat had been thrown into space at White Sands. Some human would go soon. *That* could be the ship Carolyn waited for. Risky—but she was now at that point where she was more than willing to run risks. She didn't want to die.

And that was the fine thread of distinction between Carolyn and himself. She was determined to live, to return from whence she came. But he had decided to accept death on earth as it would come to him.

It wasn't likely then that she had gone to Hanford or Brookhaven. Sometime during her marriage to Gregg Hodgkins she had known that Oak Ridge was the prime mover of those ships-to-come, and she had clung to him and to the place as long as she dared. She had eagerly helped whenever and wherever possible, hastening the day. Hadn't Hodgkins admitted to something like it? She was impatient, desperate for the ship and the power.

Carolyn had never been technically minded. She couldn't have sparked or built Hodgkins's nuclear thrust herself, couldn't so much as design a vessel to contain it. So she had primed him from his own well of knowledge, hurrying him on. What would the front-office boys at Oak Ridge have thought of that?

Suddenly, Nash wondered just how many different projects Hodgkins *had* worked on during his career?

Had he a finger in fashioning the bomb itself—diligently pushed on by his wife? Very possible. She knew only too well that no decent, durable ship could go hurtling into the vacuous sky without nuclear energy behind it—the liquid fuels simply weren't enough. And to obtain energy of that type for vehicles of that kind, the military demand had to come first. First had to come the ex-

plosive in destructive, warlike forms—any primitive government would insist on that. Next would come the by-products of medicine and manufacturing. And finally, if there existed an outside threat, would come the vehicles capable of conquering space. That was the pattern of human thinking and Carolyn was aware of it.

Powder rockets were confined to the toys, to early warfare, to amateur experimentation; the best of the powders couldn't propel a ship beyond ten thousand feet per second, and the fuel was burned in a breath. The various liquid combinations were only a little better. Nuclear energy was the only answer, and Carolyn knew it. So Carolyn had hastened the day.

It followed that Carolyn would continue to haunt Oak Ridge or Los Alamos, awaiting the final day. With side trips to Savannah River, perhaps.

He decided to concentrate on Knoxville as the most likely place; let someone else search Los Alamos, someone with proper entry and contact, someone like Dikty or his supervisor.

If she remained here she would need housing; what was it that her husband had said? She began mentally packing and preparing to leave him several weeks prior to the date she actually walked out. Not only mentally packing; Nash decided. She had thoughtfully secured a place to move to long before the day she deserted her husband, so many months before that a routine check today would reveal nothing suspicious. *Sudden thought*: to the home of that hypothetical third party?

Nash unlocked his fingers, stood up, stretched.

He put on his coat, closed the window, tested the door latch with his thumb and stepped out into the corridor.

Knoxville's streets were full with homebound crowds.

GILBERT NASH selected a nearby restaurant, preferring to eat downtown because he thought it too early to go home, too early to separate himself

from the noisy company of people. Idly, he scanned the people surging about the room.

Shirley Hoffman entered the door, searched for a vacant table. She saw Nash a moment later and her eyes widened involuntarily, as they had done earlier that afternoon. She made a tentative move as if to leave.

Nash was on his feet in an instant, inviting her to join him with a gesture and a welcoming smile. She paused to express doubt with a frown, and then slowly threaded her way to where he waited. Her face still wore a hint of indecision.

His smile dissolved into a wide grin: "If it's that bad, go away. I'll withdraw the invitation."

"No, please." She apologized and slid into the seat opposite his. "Really, it isn't what you must be thinking at all. But—"

"But what? Out with it."

"You *must* think I followed you here. I did catch a glimpse of you on the street a moment ago, but I didn't follow you. I often eat here."

"Glad to know it," Nash assured her, "and I'll come back again." He continued to grin across the table at her, to put her at ease. "But tell me just one thing and I'll answer your doubts. You recognized me this afternoon?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. I'm pleased to meet you. My name is Gilbert Nash and yours is Shirley Hoffman."

"How did you . . . ?" She stopped and fought away a blush of confusion, her eyes avoiding his. "I suppose it is rather silly to pretend we don't know each other."

"Is, yes. And I like the sound of your voice."

Her glance flew back to his, startled and wondering.

Nash was still grinning, almost laughing at her. "Dikty betrayed you, there in the doorway. He didn't recognize the new perfume you're wearing. I like it though." He waited a moment to reassure her. "I told you I'd find you again."

Her answering words rushed out hotly. "And now I suppose you're going to ask me what I was doing there!"

"No—I'm not. I know we were both there for the same reason: information. And I know that we both gained the same amount: nothing. You came away with just one thing I did not, and vice versa."

She waited for him to continue, not speaking.

He flicked a casual finger at her purse on the table. "You have a key. I have a hairpin." And then suddenly he grinned again. "But I knew you didn't have a gun last night. I only pretended you had one."

Hoffman bit her lip, cautiously watching him, and then quickly laughed. "So did I."

The waitress stopped at their table and he ordered for them both.

"Gilbert Nash, you're a most curious man. I've ever met anyone quite like you."

"That," he replied dryly, "is the opening gambit to a hundred thousand flatteries, coming from anyone else I'd call it a hundred thousand and one. But you, you can't help yourself. Dikty's job rubs off on you."

"Oh, now, I didn't intend—"

"I know you didn't, so don't apologize. And I don't mind in the least. Dikty and I have been keeping our weather eyes on each other for a long time. Amusing, eh?"

"I'm sorry," she said sincerely, "but we may as well be frank about this, don't you think?"

"Do, yes. There's no point at all in going along and pretending that he isn't watching me, every move I make. He'll have a report on this meal before morning," Nash chuckled. "But I don't believe he could sit down with me like this and enjoy dinner; he's too much the formal, hidebound Sherlock." He glanced across the table at her, amusement in tone and gesture. "I think you can."

"I think so, too. And how are you, Mr. Nash?"

"Splendid, Miss Hoffman."

"You sent me to the library this morning."

"I did? That's curious—it must have been something I said. Probably last night."

She nodded. "It was. You were speaking of hairpins. You said, you may fashion it into the horns of a bull and hold it over a flame. I wondered what you meant by that."

"Yes, I remember it now. That was in the nature of a spark. If you had been who I first thought you were, last night, that would have started a fire."

"Really?" She stared at him with round curious eyes. "You must have been expecting Mrs. Hodgkins?"

He nodded.

"How would *that* have started a fire? I mean—what does it mean? I couldn't find a thing at the library to offer a hint; I must have driven the poor librarian crazy. We searched the black magic and voodoo shelves from one end to the other. You see, I thought you might be a male witch. But there was nothing concerning the horns of a bull."

Nash laughed gaily, causing some of the nearer diners to turn and look. "Wrong department of research. Next time try archeology—and in particular the Middle East and the Mediterranean. Bulls were employed as sacrifices, as ornaments, and as strange partners in erotic dances in ancient Crete; the customs and habits occasionally spilled over into the surrounding states." He whooped again. "Male witch!"

"And you were there!" she retorted flippantly.

"I've been there," Nash answered.

"Oh? Teacher, archeologist?"

"Let's say as a student, an ambulant armchair archeologist, but I did go over the ground. Never had the opportunity to actually participate in the digging, but I would have liked to. One of my many hobbies—I enjoy studying anything having to do with people. Modern man, if you need reminding, is apt to interpret things and events according to modern reasoning and logic, still believing he is

following the logic of antiquity. Our scholars are cursed with modern minds. And they often forget that the morals of one age are not those of the next."

She was silent while the waitress prepared the table. She hoped her thoughts weren't too apparent on her face. When they were alone again she closed one eye and fixed him with a semiserious glance. "You sound as though you've made a thorough study."

"A healthy imagination," he answered dryly, "plus an undying curiosity about all things human from the time your Paleolithic ancestors first began piling one stone atop another to build a wall, up to and including the ships that leap into the sky—yesterday, today and tomorrow. I want to know where man came from, what he has been doing all these years, and where he is going. Especially where he is going."

"My favorite grandmother," she interposed, "used to say we were going to hell in a bucket."

"In one language or another, they've said that for five thousand years. Don't believe it."

"I know a man," she copied his dry tone, "who is interested in your interest."

"Good! Send him around someday and we'll have a first-rate bull session—no pun intended. I'll do my best to amuse him. Does he have an interest in archeology? Is he a religious man? Maybe he'd like to hear about the religious uproar in Europe when an indiscreet Englishman found evidence of a tremendous deluge."

"I rather doubt it," Hoffman shook her head, the brown hair swirling. "His interests run along other lines. But I'll listen."

"You can't very well help yourself!" Nash plunked down the beer bottle on the tabletop. "The steaks aren't ready and you're trapped. More beer? You don't mind if I do? Thanks. Well . . . our Englishman was excavating in Mesopotamia, delving into Assyrian and Babylonian history for traces of a still earlier people who had handed down to

them a form of writing. Did you know that the source of the world's first form of writing is still unknown?"

"I'm not very bright. What about the Englishman?"

"Still digging—he made several finds on the site, finds of immense scientific value and of course much gold. It's a curious thing, but do you know, you humans worship gold above knowledge? Without exception, every archeologist I've heard or read of has discovered gold in his graves and excavations, and has attached as much or more importance to that than the artifacts he found there. Let one of them make a report of a new find, and at the very beginning of that report he will give a description of the gold leaves, gold headdresses, gold this or gold that he uncovered. I think that curious."

He paused to see if she even remotely agreed with him.

"The deluge," Hoffman reminded him.

"To be sure—the deluge. Well, there he was, this Englishman, spading around and turning up first one thing and another, until finally he chanced upon a mass grave of royalty and servants. The ladies in waiting, the soldiers, the slaves; all murdered at the graveside and unceremoniously dumped in with their masters. That was highly unusual at that particular place and time, so the Englishman dug deeper. Beneath the mass grave he discovered a layer of thick yellow clay some eight feet through, and below *that*, still other remains of humans and buildings. So there you are."

"So there I am not!" she contradicted him. "What is it all about?"

Nash seemed mildly surprised. "The eight-foot layer of clay," he said matter of factly, "deposited by an immense flood, accompanied by high winds and rivers running out of their banks. Forty days and forty nights of rain, one hundred and fifty days before the waters receded—all that left an eight-foot deposit in the valley between the Tigris and the Euphrates. The Biblical flood, pretty well pinned down. Human remains

above the clay as well as below it. Our Englishman finished the work of two other Englishmen before him and left the religious world in something of a turmoil. They didn't quite appreciate the show."

"Now you're running in more Englishmen on me," she complained. "You aren't fair!"

"But haven't you heard of the Gilgamesh Epic?"

"Gilgamesh?" she repeated. "No."

Nash shook his head, sadly reproving her. "Modern woman, tch, tch."

"Oh, tch tch, my eye! All right, I'm thoroughly trapped now. Tell me about the other two Englishmen and the Gilgamesh Epic. Will this be a short story?"

"Sort of. I'll condense it. These other two Englishmen came before the one we just finished off. The *first* one found and shipped home to England several tablets dug out of a buried palace. The *second* Englishman then spent several years and all but wrecked his health in translating those tablets, seeking to confirm certain theories proposed by the man before him. His translation rocked the staid Victorians and created the hubbub. The poor fellow was not fully vindicated until our *third* Englishman happened along some years later and discovered that bed of clay beneath the mass grave and the palaces."

Hoffman nodded brightly. "The point is slowly becoming clear. The translator found a Biblical story on the stone tablets."

Nash regarded her with speculation. "No. He found what was supposed to be a work of pure fiction."

"Supposed to be?"

He nodded, smiling faintly. "A poem of epic proportions. The tablets had been taken from an ancient king's library, you must understand, along with many others of a more common nature. Those others contained the usual factual data and were more or less expected: histories, genealogical studies, accounts of wars, of great personages, of prisoners and booty taken, some crude geographi-

cal surveys—everything a king might desire to make his library a storehouse of knowledge and of course a testimony to his own greatness. Now comes the square peg for the round hole. That library also contained this panoramic poem, in an age where fiction (if you'll pardon the modern term) was almost unknown. This was a poem of a heroic, marvelous character—a godlike man called Gilgamesh."

"Oh . . ." Hoffman broke in, parted her lips to speak and then changed her mind. She watched him closely.

"He was a man whose beginnings, whose origin were either unknown or unrecorded, and who stalked through the land accomplishing mighty deeds. Gilgamesh was something of a born adventurer who roamed the entire known world at that time, seeking knowledge, seeking immortality. He appeared here, visited there, upsetting tyrants and unsettling kingdoms. He finally met up with a prehistoric man with an unpronounceable name and—"

"How unpronounceable?" she interrupted.

"Ut-napishtim."

Hoffman nodded her agreement. "Unpronounceable."

"—and that fellow told Gilgamesh the story of *his* life," Nash continued. He looked over at the girl musingly. "Come to think of it, that was probably the first use of the flashback technique in history. Imagine it—a fictioneer of forty centuries ago inventing the flashback."

Hoffman cupped her chin in her hand. "Gilgamesh . . ."

"I'm getting there! So the prehistoric man told Gilgamesh an incredible tale that dwarfed any of his own adventures. He told of a terrible flood that descended upon the world, told of his building a boat and loading it with supplies, loading it with all the animals he could gather together, and the calling aboard of his kinfolk from far and near. He told how his little ship had courageously ridden through the storm and rising waters for many days and nights, and finally, how he sent out first a dove and then a raven

to seek land. And that was how Ut-napishtim and his clan lived through the deluge while all around them perished." Nash studied the girl over the rim of his glass. "Sound familiar?"

"That was on the stone tablets?" she demanded.

"It was—yes, hammered out as pure fiction."

"And the tablets were supposed to be how old?"

"Three to four thousand years. Do you see now why the Victorians suddenly suffered rising blood pressure?"

"Indeed I do! I should be inclined to doubt the evidence myself. But I suppose this is where our third Englishman comes in?"

"Does, yes. He showed that the tablets were indeed fiction—they were the Assyrian version of hand-me-down Babylonian tales, which in turn were presumably based on fact. Simply a case of one kingdom borrowing a neighbor's folk history and concocting a story. The Englishman made several discoveries indicating the authenticity of the tablets, including that layer of clay deposited by the flood. So you see—even historical novels, superman novels, were written four thousand years ago. Knocked out in stone. The skeptic may regard this one as merely a tale told by some nameless poet who sought to please a king; the believer, as the bold and earliest chronicle of Noah." His fingers drummed on the tabletop. "If you put any faith in archeology at all, you will find that excavators have not only discovered and dated the deluge, but have gone on to discover traces of a still earlier people who must have lived in the times of Genesis. They are slowly catching up with anthropology and geology."

"I'm curious about the dates," Hoffman said, just as curiously watching him.

"The deluge? Well, our Englishman's mass burial of king and slave happened about six thousand years ago. The layer of clay was before that, beneath it. Eight, ten thousand years ago? That remains to be seen. What you call modern man

has been on earth now some twenty-five thousand years, and your primitive ancestor existed for perhaps another seventy-five thousand before that. That's a rather broad span in which to attempt to pin down a definite place and time, but men are still digging. One group in particular are now searching for old Ut-napishtim's boat. If and when they find it, they can pretty well date it. Or rather, they can date the trees which furnished timber for the boat."

"I've heard of that," the girl put in. "Tree rings."

"No—not in a case like this. Someone has come up with a new process of measurement called the C-14 method, a process which measures the passage of time by the amount of radioactive residue in an organic substance. Your tree rings would be useless here because the tree died when it was cut down. It might measure life before it was felled, but not after." He paused a moment in thought. "If the archeologists are lucky enough to find a chunk of wood from Ut-napishtim's boat—well, they will tell you the approximate year that tree stood. The approximate year of Noah and his flood." He grinned mischievously. "I wonder if that information will upset anyone?"

They lapsed into silence as the waitress brought the meal and served it.

"I want to ask one more question," she ventured after a moment. "You very briefly mentioned the subject but you neglected to follow it through."

"What was that?"

"Did this adventurer, this Gilgamesh fellow, find his immortality?"

After a second's hesitation Nash glanced at the girl's intent face.

"He found what he was searching for. But it was much too late to save his life."

VII

CUMMINGS wandered in aimless circles about the inner office.

"He talks to horses," Cummings said dourly to the man seated at the desk behind him.

Dikty nodded.

"He *must* talk to the horses; the people over at Treasury tell me he carefully notes down all his winnings but never his losses. Treasury claims his tax returns are models of something or other; fifty dollars for this case, seventy-five for that one, total earnings as an investigator something less than a thousand per year. You'd think he would starve."

"But he doesn't," Dikty murmured.

"He doesn't!" Cummings kicked at a chair in disgust.

"A shrewd cover," Dikty commented.

"A very shrewd cover for an income of less than a thousand per year. That house out in the country cost him something. Say—when was the first year he filed?"

"March of 1941, for the previous year. In Georgia." He stared around the vacant outer room and then back to Dikty. "The girl's not in yet."

"Something holding her up I suspect."

"Sick?"

"Landlady said no." Dikty retrieved his pipe from an inner pocket. "Landlady said she left an hour or more ago, in a devil of a hurry. She'll be along."

Cummings turned back to the window. "She had dinner with him last night, eh? Maybe he gave her a tip on a horse."

"I'm the fool who did the tipping," Dikty retorted sourly, staring into the black bowl of the pipe. "Subject connected the two of us at the funeral when he saw me sniffing her perfume. I thought it was something new and stopped to sniff—it was. But she stumbled onto him in a restaurant last night and he promptly invited her to his table. She jumped at the opportunity. Reports that he made no attempt at all to pump her—it was the other way around."

"She'll do," Cummings nodded. "Pick up anything else?"

Dikty reached into a vest pocket and extracted a slip of paper. "He stopped by a bookstore this morning to order a book. *The Thermodynamics of the Steady State*. That's not politics—I

asked. Something to do with chemical engineering."

"Subject's healthy interest in science continues."

Dikty packed his pipe in silence and then poised an unlit match in the air. "I've been wondering if it could have anything to do with Code four-four-seven? Chemical engineering, now. But then, I'm suspicious of everything and everybody."

"I sort of doubt it. But I'll look into it." Cummings shook his head. "You can never be sure until you've checked. We had to stop the presses on an encyclopedia last week—the fools were going to publish the figures on the critical mass of U-235."

Dikty was startled. "How'd they find out?"

"The consulting physicist who was writing the article for them figured it out in his fool head, and wanted to include it. We also made him eliminate some references to the refining properties of U-238; he wanted to tell the world how to make a more potent explosion. We seized the plates and several thousand copies already run off. How long can this go on?"

Dikty didn't answer because the outer door opened then and Shirley Hoffman staggered in, her arms laden with dusty volumes. Her eager young face seemed excited.

"Good morning," she said brightly, looking from one to the other. "I've been to the library. Treasure trove." She pushed the corridor door shut with her heel and dropped the burden on her desk. "I'm hot on the trail."

"Of what?"

"Of mummies, buried kings, the deluge, and Gilgamesh." She paused a moment, frowning. "Gilgamesh can't be found. Not in our library."

"I'll get it for you in Washington," Cummings said. "Why?"

"Our subject knows all about Gilgamesh, so I want to know all about Gilgamesh." She thought to correct the supervisor. "Gilgamesh is a *him*, not an *it*. A prehistoric man who wandered

around the ancient Mediterranean; he's in archeology. Can you really get it for me?"

He snapped his fingers. "You name it and you can have it. Just like that."

"You're making fun of me."

Cummings turned again to examine the stack of volumes. "And now it's archeology?"

"Yes, very much so. It was all he talked about last night, and he wasn't trying to impress me. He *knows*."

Dikty grunted. "He knows which horse is the winner."

A door slammed with a distant, muffled sound and the three of them ceased talking. Dikty twisted around in his chair to reach out and touch the volume control on a tiny speaker mounted above the desk. The speaker hummed with increased life, but nothing more. The trio waited long minutes in continued silence.

"Subject has reported for work," Dikty muttered after a while. "Busy making his thousand or less for this year." He listened as the microphones picked up the heavy squeaking as his chair was occupied. And then nothing.

"Serious thinker," Cummings suggested dryly.

"He is, really," Hoffman agreed. "He has the detached viewpoint of the scholar, the witness who is sitting out of the mainstream of history, merely appraising it as it marches by. He continually referred to *my* ancestors, *my* humans, as if they were mine but not his."

"He had to be born somewhere," Dikty repeated his old declaration. "And I don't mean in Miami, Florida, on March 8th, 1940. After all—he's thirty-one years old now."

"I rather like him," Hoffman said. "He is a funny man. By that I mean, strange. Strange eyes, strange skin, strange manner of thinking. Sometimes I could glimpse the thought behind his speech—very strange thoughts. I found myself wondering if he thought in words, in pictures, in symbols or abstractions; perhaps he doesn't think the way we do at all. But I rather like him."

"Don't," Cummings warned suddenly, whirling from the window. "And be careful of him. Until we turn up a proven murderer, he's our suspect—a double suspect for loitering about the Ridge." He turned on Dikty. "What was it he said to the police yesterday after the funeral?"

"That he was thinking of moving, that there isn't much left for him in Knoxville any more."

"If I thought for a moment he was referring to Hodgkins, I'd nab him now! But he seems to have another purpose now—he's hunting the Hodgkins widow."

"Who isn't?"

Cummings again caught sight of the books stacked atop the girl's desk. "Why these," he asked curiously, "why this—this what's-his-name man?"

"Gilgamesh. Partly to satisfy my curiosity," she hastened to explain, "and partly to catch him in an error. If *that's* possible. He told me things last night that I never dreamed existed, and I'm very eager to learn more. He also told me things that may not be in these books and if that be the case. . . ." She let the suggestion hang there.

Cummings flipped open a cover to read the flyleaf.

"Do you know about something or other called the C-14 Method?" Shirley asked.

Cummings shut the book to study her. "Yes. An atomic measurement of time, a by-product of the Ridge you might say. Why?"

"He said, if they find the remains of old Noah's Ark, they can measure the passage of time since it was built."

"That's right," Cummings said slowly, examining the books.

"I don't believe in passing up anything," Cummings resumed, "no matter how insignificant or ridiculous it may seem on the surface. Hodgkins's wife—I mean widow. We couldn't find her birthdate or birthplace either. When she married Hodgkins she had no past!"

Dikty sat down to scabble frantically through the papers in a desk drawer. He

finally found those he was searching for and looked up at his superior.

"According to the police and the neighbors, a part of the descriptions match: the unusual eyes, the poised swift lines, the long youthfulness. . . ."

Cummings hesitated only a moment, his face tightened in a knot of speculative thought; he grabbed up his hat. He sped for the outer door and was gone. The corridor door slammed shut behind him.

"I think," Dikty said quietly, "that something is about to happen to our friend."

VIII

NASH had slowly become aware that someone was following him.

The disturbing shadow lurking somewhere behind was not the security agent, Dikty, who knew that Nash was aware of his presence and accepted it. The motions of secrecy were maintained because that was a part of the game, but the actual secrecy had been abandoned when each realized the other was aware of the situation.

And now—this new shadow.

It was not Dikty behind him; Dikty was ahead of him. This day, Gilbert Nash had quietly and with some amusement turned the tables and begun following Dikty, for he saw that the security agent was intent upon Hodgkins's widow. Nash tagged along after him, and the strange new shadow hung behind them both.

Nash stopped in a drugstore, ordered ice cream, and sat down on a stool where he could watch the doorway of the real estate office across the street which Dikty had entered.

Idly, he watched the people going by outside the window, wondering if one of them might be his new shadow. A young man sauntering along with a brief case, two women with packages in their hands and inspecting each window as they passed it, a gangling youth reading a science fiction magazine, a man with a brief case—Nash jerked his eyes around to follow the repeater. Brief case entered

the drugstore and bought a package of pipe tobacco, left again. He did not reappear. Dikty emerged from the doorway across the street. Nash finished his ice cream and strolled outside, letting Dikty have a lead the length of a full block. As soon as he left the drugstore he again felt the presence of eyes behind him, on him.

The invisible eyes were disconcerting, malignant. They imparted a sense of unease and irritation because they could not be located and identified, because they constantly bored into the back of his head like telescopic sights on a rifle. Again and again he attempted to locate them without visibly advertising his intention, but without success. The man was damned slick—whoever he was.

Dikty continued his hopeless search, possibly aware of Nash behind him or possibly not, but Nash was certain he did not feel the new shadow there or he would certainly have done something about it. *Sudden thought:* Dikty might know very well a new man was behind the two of them, and so ignored the matter. In any event, Dikty went on looking for some scrap of information that might point out the hiding place of Hodgkins's widow, but looked for nothing behind him. . . .

LATE in the afternoon, Dikty's trail led past the public library and Nash felt the sudden intuition that Shirley Hoffman was near by. He abandoned Dikty and turned in the double doors. She was checking out some books at the desk. Nash walked up beside her, watched the librarian punch Hoffman's card and number through the dating machine, and reached over to pick them up.

"*The Oldest Civilization of Greece*," he read after flipping the uppermost volume spine-up. "Badly outdated; fifty years old if it's a day."

The librarian looked at him with disapproval.

"Hello," Hoffman smiled. "You have newer, I suppose?"

"Have, yes. Want to go out and look at them?"

"I'm willing—although I suppose I should have hesitated modestly."

Outside, she paused. "I *do* have something here." She fingered the books he was carrying and removed one. "The librarian recommended it after I outlined my wants: Huxley's *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*."

He stared at it curiously. "Why that?"

"I asked for anything on longevity or immortality."

Nash stopped walking and turned to look at her. "Still riding Gilgamesh?"

Hoffman nodded.

"But this isn't the same," he protested. "This is a dying old man who is determined not to die; he's willing to spend every million he has to stay alive forever."

"Does he?" she wanted to know, examining the worn cover of the book.

"That's the fine point of the story; read it and see." He began walking again.

"But he and Gilgamesh were after the same thing," she protested.

"Yes—in a sense. This old man was fifty or sixty years old and afraid to die because he was also afraid of meeting your God face to face. But Gilgamesh was something else altogether. Gilgamesh was—well, *much* older, and sought only to prolong his life its natural span, to live out his appointed time. Much the way you would ward off a childhood disease, that you might live to be an adult. He was not afraid of dying, nor afraid to meet his God; when he realized his search for 'immortality' was a useless one he abandoned it, resigned himself to dying young." Nash gave her a sidelong glance. "That's a relative term; not young in the sense that you are young."

Hoffman moved her head to catch his eye. "And how young are you?" she asked bluntly.

"Over twenty-one," he answered promptly and laughed. "I learned that from women who vote."

"Cheat!" she declared.

"Nosey," he replied.

They walked slowly with the evening

crowd. After a silence the girl spoke again.

"How old was Gilgamesh?"

"When?"

"Oh—when he met Noah, for instance."

"I would say many hundreds of years."

"Really?" She thought about it for a moment. "Then he would be several thousand today?"

Nash inclined his head. "Would, yes."

"But that's quite impossible!"

"Remind me to tell you about the May flies—later on this evening when I have you in my web."

"May flies? What in the world do they have to do with Gilgamesh?"

"They live a full lifetime in less than a day," he said.

"Oh? Your implication then, is that a year in the life of Gilgamesh is not the same as a year in my life?"

"Yes and no; again, the terms are relative."

"But would Gilgamesh *still* say he was dying young?"

"If he were alive today, yes."

"Why?"

"Because he would be—far short of his old age."

"But why," she persisted. "Why would he be dying? What was it that he was seeking to prolong his life?"

Nash grinned down at her in high humor. "Those buried tablets didn't say. The old poet gave no hint."

She changed the subject. "Where shall we eat?"

"Spoken like a forward wench." Taking her arm, he guided her across the sidewalk. "Can you cook?"

"Certainly. I expect to be married one day."

"Let's practice this evening."

"Cooking, or being married?"

"Hoffman!" He removed his hand from her arm.

"I suppose," she said expectantly, "that you have the usual well-equipped kitchen?"

"Yes. My car's not far from here." He moved a single step quite suddenly.

His attitude was one of intent listening. The pedestrian current flowed around them.

Hoffman glanced up at him, turned to follow his blank gaze and instantly mistook his intentions. He was staring absently at a florist's window.

"Flowers?" she asked with surprise. "Are you becoming serious?"

"What?" he replied, inattentive. He was still listening to something unseen, unknown. He had realized that the eyes were gone, the telescopic sights removed from the back of his head. Thinking back quickly, he realized now that the boring eyes had left him when he entered the library, but had not been there again when he emerged with the girl.

And that implied—what?

"Gilbert Nash!" the girl exclaimed.

He emerged from his inner shell.

"What?"

"I said, the florist is closed."

"Oh, too bad," he answered absently.

"And I wanted to buy you a cactus. Come on, I'm curious as to how well you can cook."

NASH moved his chair back from the table, making a contented sound. He winked across the table at the girl and closed his eyes.

"Behold," Shirley Hoffman declared, "the well-stuffed male! One would think you'd never eaten before."

"My pet brunette. After tonight, you are. Any woman who can prepare a meal like that is my pet."

"Any woman," she repeated. "I'm only the latest."

"The latest and the first, in this house at least. It would surprise you to know how long it has been since I've enjoyed a woman's company." He chuckled. "My good neighbors will have a field day tomorrow; if you'd really like to provide them with spectacle, we can open the blinds and stage a bang-up performance."

"Such as?"

"I'll chase you around and around the sofa."

"No, thank you. I'm more interested

in your library. And the artifacts. I want to see what the archeologists missed." Her stare was candid. "I want to see the youth dances."

"Do you now?" He pushed away from the table as if to get up. "You'll also want to see my etchings." Nash laughed at her expression. "Honest, I do have etchings and you will want to see them. I have several plates or the Mycenaean Age, some early Minoan and late Egyptian sketches. I also have a few rare ones, old treasures, done by an artist attached to Napoleon's army. I think you'll enjoy them."

"Napoleon? In Egypt?"

"Was, yes." He closed his eyes for a moment in concentrated thought. "Near the end of the eighteenth century I think, following his Italian conquests. Somewhat like another man before him he was really seeking a trade route to India, but he wound up on the Nile with the army and the artist. Lasted a bit over a year; he and the artist lived to return home but the army wasn't as lucky. The artist—by name of Denon, Vivant Denon—carried with him in his imagination and on paper some of the most peculiar treasures yet taken from Egypt."

"Peculiar?" she questioned.

"Wait until you see them. Highly prized by certain types of collectors, and rather expensive today."

"How did you get them?"

"There was a day when they were quite cheap—a dime a dozen. Time has increased their value of course."

"Very well, you've aroused my curiosity; I want to see these precious treasures."

"Rather thought you would." He stood up and pulled back the chair for her. "Leave the dishes for the maid."

"You have one?" she said, more sharply than she had intended.

"Me," he answered. "I can do them later." Her tone had drawn his scrutiny. "Meanwhile, the night is young and you're so . . ."

Shirley turned, raised her lips. "Yes?"

"You're so hungry for knowledge." He pretended to not see the minute annoyance on her face. "Ten paces forward and turn right at the closed door."

He preceded her across the room and opened a door that revealed a book-lined room, four solid walls of volumes reaching from ceiling to floor without a window opening anywhere, a room which contained nothing other than two easy chairs, a single floor lamp placed between them, and a record player.

"Well!" she said with pleasant surprise.

"Conducive to thinking," he explained, "either deep or shallow thoughts depending upon the inclination, and very nice for dreaming I might add. There's no interference from the outside—the room is fairly soundproof. Try it sometime." He grinned at her and held it until she had responded. "The books are arranged in no particular system or order except by their general nature and my own habits. Starting there—" and he motioned to a corner — "mathematics, philosophy, chemistry, biochemistry, geology and geography, down there the psychology and sociology. Sociology extends around the corner and continues there. It seems to be on the increase, you see. Here, a bit on linguistics and much on astronomy. A favorite of mine, that—plus archeology and anthropology. Over there is paleontology, and those two shelves are devoted to physics." He studied the two shelves and added softly, "That, too, seems to be on the increase."

"No books," she asked curiously, "just for reading?"

"Fiction? These are more provocative and some are certainly wilder than fiction. But yes—some." He moved the guiding finger. "Over there."

"Not many," Shirley said a moment later.

"Not much time for it," he confessed.

"Pardon me," she contradicted, and then smiled to rob the contradiction of its sting, "but I know a man who thinks you have all the time in the world. To do nothing."

"The man would be shocked to discover how wrong he is!" Nash declared almost angrily.

"Indeed?" she said dryly. Her steady glance on his face said volumes more. "And now, sir, the etchings. Or am I being forward again?"

HE BROUGHT them to her from some other room of the house, returning to the book-lined room with both hands full. There were two large loose-leaf volumes like scrapbooks and many folders and folios, all bound or wrapped in a sturdy material for maximum protection; even so, some of the paper was yellowed and cracked with age and occasionally a jagged streak ran across the face of an illustration to betray its ancient brittleness. Her eyes wandered across the face of the page and stopped on a figure she recognized, Hathor, the Egyptian goddess of love.

Across the room the music played softly.

She was not aware of the passage of time, nor of the room, nor consciously aware of one record after another dropping onto the turntable to play itself out.

With each turned page, each carefully shielded drawing plucked out of a folder, and examined in minute detail, she found herself contemplating the mind and the personality of the men who had done these illustrations, speculating on what they had first found in those far-away lands to fire their imaginations in this manner. Had Napoleon himself seen this one, that one—and what had he thought of it? Near the end, she realized something else. The men who had done these things were not thinkers in the conventional sense. They too, by this evidence, did not think as she thought, as Dikty thought, or even Cummings. Did they think along other lines, in abstractions or symbols, or perhaps in a manner utterly foreign—as Nash did? Who was to say now? What present-day human could judge evidence such as this with a mind free of bias and prejudice, free of smirking obscenities? A

most undeserved obsequy.

She found herself staring blankly at a shelf of books on the far wall, hands folded in her lap atop the stack of pictures, the record player turning on some nameless waltz. Without turning, she knew Nash was seated in the other chair behind her. She knew also that she was hungry and what had caused it, what could satisfy it.

She calmly analyzed the hunger and traced it to its root. The vacuum was no longer undefined and the outlet no longer hidden from her searching mind.

Shirley transferred the contents of her lap to the chair seat, and stepped to stand behind Nash who was deep in a printed page. Eagerly, boldly, she bent over him and locked his unsuspecting head in her arms. Then she kissed him, held him locked there for a racing eternity, unwilling to break the contact of their lips.

He jumped when their lips met, struggled to break free but she only tightened her arms. Then he sat quite still. Had she been watching his hands she would have seen his fists clench in determination, only to open slowly in a peculiar surrender. Had she been watching his hands and had she been able to read the enigmatic messages there, she would have known that he was fighting an intangible, fighting to reject and not use the easy access she had provided into a very private place—the last remaining privacy man has in the world. The privacy of her mind, the very much hidden world of personal thought. As she persisted in the long kiss his hands unclenched, lay limp and open, and he walked through a doorway into a room without her knowing it. Gregg Hodgkins had required years to discover that entrance and the aftermath.

Shirley broke away, stepped back, breathing heavily.

Nash stared up at her in mild astonishment and uttered a single word. She did not know the word, it was not English and so was strange to her. But by the intensity with which he said it, she knew it to be an epithet.

"Are you angry?" she said after a moment.

His answer was not an answer to her question. It was something else altogether, but she thought he was referring to the kiss.

"So long!" Nash exclaimed, still astonished. "So incredibly long. I couldn't see the end at all."

IX

YOU owe me so much," Shirley said unexpectedly, "so very, very much." She put down her coffee cup into its saucer. "You owe me an explanation. Many explanations."

"May flies," she said. "An unexplained search for an unexplained immortality. And why it was found too late to save a life. *What* was found too late? Oh, you owe me so very much!"

A dread, growing weight was suddenly lifted. Nash almost laughed aloud as he asked, "Who wants to know? You—or a man you know?"

"I do," she retorted promptly. "But I suppose the man will know, eventually. I rather like my job."

He slowly turned about and sat down, reached out saying, "Come here."

Shirley sank down beside him. "This is nice."

"Most of the ordinary things in the world are nice. Cling to them while you can."

"Am I going to hear a lecture?"

"No. Of course not."

"I was only teasing. Talk to me. About May flies."

"It may get awfully boring."

"Then I'll stop you. I know how."

"Yes," he agreed dryly, "you know how. And what you don't yet know you'll learn. You have a long time to learn."

"Three score and ten," she quoted the cliché.

He said nothing to that, wrapped in his own thoughts. The house was quiet, the record player long stilled and the lights turned out except for a small table lamp in the room with them.

"May flies," she prompted.

"May flies," he repeated. "The eggs are laid in fresh water, to be scattered by the currents, finally to come to rest wherever they may. The larvae often live for several years."

"I know that," she interrupted.

"Be quiet. The adults are the ones that concern us. Do you know how long the adults live? A few hours. Only a few hours—they must live a full lifetime in less than a day. That seems strange to us, incredibly strange and incredibly tragic, because *we* live three score and ten." He glanced briefly at the girl beside him. "Sometimes longer. But in the space of those few hours the insect must accomplish his mission, fulfill whatever duties have devolved upon him, and prepare the eggs for the following generation. And then die of old age before sundown. Is he aware that only a few hours have passed?"

"Well . . . I don't know."

"He is not. If he is able to think at all, a lifetime is a lifetime. If he is able to think about it, measure it, compare it, then he would surely know he was being cheated by nature. But he is not able to do any of these things, so, he lives his full lifetime until old age catches him. You do that, don't you?"

"Well, of course. But I'm not—"

"You aren't a fly. You are a human. A human has the means and the intelligence to think, to reason, to measure. The insect cannot do that and must rely on instinct, must see to it that his work is done to beat that instinctive deadline. But insect and human are both following the same pattern: birth, life over a given span, death. The May fly is as old at the end of the day as you will be at the end of three score and ten. There is no real difference except that each lives according to a different measure of time."

"Oh, I think I see what you're getting at. You're drawing an analogy."

He nodded. "An analogy. Is there a larger timetable on which *your* three score and ten are but a few hours as well?"

Shirley was staring up into his face with fascination.

"Hasn't it ever occurred to you that something may live untold thousands of years beyond you, may live a fantastic length of time according to your standards? But then, your standards aren't valid when applied to a different scale, a different concept of life. No more than the standards of the May fly would be if he attempted to fit you into his life concept. You look down upon the insect from your longer life span, to realize he is gone in a few of your hours. May not something else look down upon you, see you vanish in a few hours?"

"All this," Shirley said in a small voice, "is leading up to something. I can feel it."

"All this is leading up to Gilgamesh and his supposed immortality. I repeat, *supposed* immortality. An immortal according to common definition is a person who never dies, a person with unending existence. Gilgamesh was no immortal; he was only thought to be because he existed before the ancient poets were born and was still there after they had gone. He seemed immortal to them because he did not follow their timetable to the grave.

"The human species has a terrible blind spot: time. They invented time and then measured it according to standards they could understand. Being egotists they built time around themselves and used measures that fitted themselves alone. They cast the entire universe into their own time mold, judging it by their own standards as if those standards were the universal law. Humans believe they alone live *natural* life spans, the oft-mentioned three score and ten. Their vanity must make them the norm. They look down upon the insect as subnormal because he lives only hours or days of their time; they openly gape and marvel at those hoary old trees because the trees live an abnormal length of their time. They will never admit that the insect, or the tree, or something else altogether may know time in the true normal—if the true

normal actually exists."

"Does it?" she asked.

"I wouldn't know. I'm not that big." He shook his head. "Humans believe they are the pinpoint upon which all creation revolves."

"That doesn't sound fair."

"No, it doesn't. But I believe it to be the truth. Your histories are full of repetitions of that."

Shirley was still watching his face and finally asked, "What *was* Gilgamesh seeking?"

"Water. Water to prolong his life."

"You said . . ." and she halted to remember his words. "You said he found it too late to save his life, he found his 'immortality' too late. What did you mean by that?"

"I meant that Gilgamesh sought water to live, and by the time he found it the die was already cast—it was too late to save his life because he had gone too long without it."

"Water?" she asked incredulously.

"There was water on the island, the type of water natural to that island. But it was not his kind of water."

"I think you'd better explain that," she said dubiously.

"Suppose I tell you a story?"

"What kind of a story?"

"About a castaway." He stared at the moving shadows on the opposite wall. "About a man from another island who lived a part of his life span on the foods and water natural to his island." He paused again. "About Gilgamesh."

"I want to know *all* about Gilgamesh."

"To satisfy a man you know?"

"To satisfy me."

GILGAMESH was born on an island," he began slowly, choosing his words with care, "an island that he thought was all the universe, all creation, until he left his childhood and began to learn that it was only one among many. When he left his childhood behind he began the rigorous training necessary to become a mariner.

"He discovered—with quite a shock—

that in one respect his island was unique—the smallness of its population. Eventually he discovered why, and the answer lay in genetics. The life in his world was one of lethal heredity because its people were victims of doubled chromosomes. By far the majority of births were stillborn, or mutated monsters that would not or could not live. Life would have vanished altogether had not a saving factor appeared in an attempt to balance the scale of nature. Longevity.

"Few infants lived. Those that did lived a great length of time. Gilgamesh grew into early manhood, completed the training necessary to sail, and he married."

Shirley flashed him a startled look.

"He married early because it was the custom and the means of prolonging the race. Before he made his first voyage he had had two children—both stillborn. And then he began a career as a mariner, of sailing between the islands.

"One of the vital things he learned was that life—his life—always hung in a delicate balance. The ships were the stoutest, the best made, yet could founder at any moment, and when the ship went, life went with it because the islands were scattered amazingly far and wide. Too, the food and water on a given island were not always acceptable to life—his life. Food wasn't as much a problem as water, because the water welling up on the island of his birth was not the same as water elsewhere.

"It was a poor substitute which, if one were forced to rely on it alone, would not sustain life the *natural* span. It was, in short, a thin liquid to prolong life a short while—nothing more."

The girl had been sitting very quietly, listening to his voice and watching his profile against the flickering firelight. Now she said, "So Gilgamesh became a sailor. And he was shipwrecked."

Nash nodded somberly, his eyes still following the shadowy patterns on the far wall. "It was one of those dark unseen things that hurtled out of nowhere; it happened in an instant. He was with

his wife when the alarm bell rang. And in the next instant he was hurled through a breach in the cabin wall, not knowing if his wife had found time to prepare herself."

"Did he . . . did he ever find out?"

"Yes. When her body was washed ashore."

Shirley moved her lips to form the words, "I'm sorry," without actually speaking them.

"So—Gilgamesh hunted water, the kind of water needed for his kind of life. He searched over all the known world, always hoping that somewhere he would find it. You see—it was quite inevitable that those ancient Mesopotamian poets should make him out a demigod."

"But he *did* find it somewhere—too late."

"He never found it in its natural state, and so his body began to deteriorate for lack of it the same as your body would deteriorate if you were deprived of water and forced to drink some other fluid."

"This water is manufac—oh!"

"Yes," Nash repeated dryly, "oh."

"Heavy water?" she questioned.

"That's the popular name for it. Deuterium oxide. Eventually men began scientific experimentation for purposes of war, and produced heavy water."

"But that was only a short time ago. Twenty or thirty years ago," she protested.

"I told you Gilgamesh found it too late to save his life."

She was silent for a long while and he said nothing, allowing her the privacy of her thoughts. Shirley was silent for so long that at last he moved his head to look at her, to study the intense expression on her face. Their eyes met.

"All of this—" she paused and swallowed—"all of this is rather difficult to believe in one sitting. And not a little confusing."

"I'm aware of that." He smiled down at her.

"Once before," she continued slowly, fumbling with words, "I asked you how old Gilgamesh was—at the time of

Noah, for instance. And by the way, I've discovered since that Gilgamesh predated the biblical flood as well as postdated it, if we may believe the stone tablets. You see, I've been doing a little bit of research of my own."

"I see."

"But I'm curious about the age of Gilgamesh, about his original appearance on this—*island*. How long ago was Gilgamesh washed ashore?"

Nash furrowed his brow. "Now *that* is difficult to answer. How would you mark time before the invention of the calendar? The best I can do is make an estimate based on the people and the life he first discovered on the island. And then compare those people to present-day anthropological studies."

"I'll accept that. Which people?"

"The Azilian culture."

"Azilian? I'm sorry, but that doesn't convey a meaning to me. I'm not familiar with it."

"It is generally identified with the early mesolithic period in western Europe."

Shirley turned on him with wide staring eyes and he saw the shock reflected in them. "But that was nearly ten thousand years ago!"

"Yes."

"I try to keep an open mind," she said. "But sometimes I just can't help myself!"

"Quite human," Nash grinned, "oh, quite human."

"That's just it," she still protested. "*Human*."

"I didn't mean it that way," he said sharply.

"I'm sorry." She lowered her eyes. "If you don't mind . . . I'd like to ask you something. And I promise not to make a scene."

"Fire away. I'll answer if I can."

"The shipwreck—" she began—"that shipwreck ten thousand years ago. You said that the body of his wife was washed ashore." She hesitated briefly as a fleeting emotional shadow passed across his face. "Were there any other living survivors besides Gilgamesh?"

"Yes. The island was large and much of it was like an unexplorable jungle. While he searched for water he also sought his companions. He found a few of them, eventually. The rest had either perished with the ship or were marooned in some inaccessible place. Slowly, with time, those few survivors appeared."

"Are they—are they still . . .?"

"Alive today? No. With one exception they met early death."

Shirley questioned, "With one exception?"

Nash glanced at her curiously. "You can check this if you like. In France, in 1940, two scientists fled France with two hundred and ten quarts of heavy water, barely a jump ahead of the invading Germans who wanted that treasure. The fugitives fled across the channel with their deuterium oxide—and arrived safely in England with one hundred and sixty-five quarts. They could offer no explanation as to what had happened to the missing forty-five quarts. It was generally assumed they had been lost overboard."

"But they hadn't?" she queried.

He didn't answer her directly. "The loss of those forty-five quarts was the first clue to the existence of another survivor—a survivor who still lived at this late day." Again he turned to her, watching her eyes and her sensitive face, wondering if she was mentally following him. "A search was instituted for that other survivor, sparked by the very natural desire to be reunited. And finally a trace was found."

"Nothing more than a trace?"

"A trace. At Peenemunde."

Shirley frowned. "I should know the name."

"The German rocket site, where the V-2's were built."

"Oh—of course." Her frown had not quite vanished. "And a trace of him was found there?"

"A trace of her was found there," he corrected.

"Her? A woman!"

"A woman. It seems that she had been

at Peenemunde for some years; since 1934 in fact, when the German government began seriously considering rocket experimentation. But now only a trace of her remained—she was gone, and forty-five quarts of heavy water had disappeared from the middle of the English channel with her. It wasn't too difficult to guess why she had been at Peenemunde, why she finally left there, and where she was going next. Not when you knew the nature of the woman. After all this time she was still not reconciled to an early death. She wanted a ship to return home." He paused.

Shirley shook her head, not speaking.

"She realized that Peenemunde was not the answer, that Germany would not last long enough to build the ship she desired. So she came to the United States. Once in the United States she surveyed the situation carefully and assayed her chances. And then made a choice. She married a young man who gave brilliant promise in the field of physics, aiding and abetting him by her own knowledge whenever possible, pushing here, thrusting him forward there, causing his name and work to appear in places and publications where it would be noted.

"Eventually her husband found himself working for the Manhattan District, found himself at Oak Ridge, and probably much to his surprise, found himself assisting in the designing and building of an atomic reaction motor which was capable of hurling a ship through space. Her long-awaited victory was within her grasp and her husband, now useless and something of a dangerous weight about her neck, was murdered."

"Carolyn Hodgkins!" the girl exclaimed.

"Carolyn," he nodded. "She is determined to get off the earth and she will not be stopped as long as she lives." Nash fell silent, listening again to the house and the night.

"Carolyn Hodgkins is a—a survivor?"

"Yes."

"The only other one? No more

than—two?"

"No more than two."

"Is . . ." she hesitated with some embarrassment. "Is she the only one determined to live—and to leave?"

"She is. The other one long ago resigned himself to remaining here, to a premature death. Without dramatics, without mock heroism, he simply accepted the situation and is now quite content to await what comes." Nash moved slightly, lifting a hand to touch her arm. "You must remember that the only thing I ever loved is buried here, somewhere. I *want* to stay."

There was a minute—and somewhere in the night, and Nash lifted his eyes to stare through the window at the sky.

"I think I can understand that," Shirley said haltingly and still with evident embarrassment. "And I'd like to ask . . . Please, this is rather personal, but . . ."

"Ask it." He was listening hard to the darkness.

"Did he—did you ever marry again?"

"Marry? No, not in that sense. I have mated—many times, but I never married again."

"Were there, I mean are there any descendants?"

"Yes, a few." He shook his head. "A very, very few. My genetic curse still follows me, always will. But there are a few."

Shirley looked up, saw his gaze on the window and followed it, uncomprehending. "The descendants couldn't know, of course."

"They have no way of knowing. I suppose most of them are pleasantly surprised to find themselves living to an unusual age. Unusual in respect to those around them."

"Do you know any of them?" she persisted. "That is, do you *meet* them? I'm sorry I can't express that more clearly—I'm all jumbled up inside. But in your—travels have you ever found any of your own descendants?"

He was grinning broadly at some inner secret as he reached out to help her up. She was standing quite close to

him and he rested his hands on her shoulders. "It's always a startling thing; they appear most unexpectedly and in the strangest places. Of course there is seldom an outward physical trait to mark them, so I've learned to look for the subtler things—the attitude, the personality, the mental awareness and the matter of their longevity. That's the greatest clue, that and a talent for mental telepathy—for extrasensory perception." He shook her playfully. "Yes, it happens every now, and then. Makes me feel something like a fatuous grandfather."

Shirley hesitated, then said, "I still have a job, you know. A man will want to know about you."

"You tell the man what you please, or omit what you please. I haven't told you everything that I could." He hadn't told her, for instance, that a microphone had been planted in Dikty's office long before Dikty thought of putting an instrument in his. "Say as much or as little as you please. Only a word of warning for your own safety—consider first how much will be believed."

"That's my greatest problem," she admitted.

Shirley moved toward her purse on the table. "It's really late, I've got to go."

She lifted her lips invitingly.

Nash kissed her briefly.

"I've really got to go," she said.

Nash pulled the car keys from his pocket and shook them in her face. "You'll either wait for me or you'll walk. And that's quite a distance to town." He opened the door and stood aside for her.

"I'll wait, for you—or I'd never get home. And I'll bet you that I'm late for work in the—*Gilbert!*" Shirley screamed his name and shrank back, blocking the doorway. . . .

X

THE long, raw sleepless night was reflected on her face. Hoffman sat miserably behind Dikty's desk holding her head in both hands. Her head ached

with a throbbing intensity and no amount of aspirin and strong coffee had been able to wash it away.

"Tell me," Cummings demanded savagely, "where did he go?"

"I don't know! I've told you, I don't know." She held her head tightly, afraid it would burst from pain and the booming anger of his voice. "He just disappeared."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

"When?"

"I don't know. Before the police got there."

"Why did you call the police? Why didn't you call me?"

"Because he told me to. I didn't think of you—not then. Not until later."

"And later he was gone?"

"Yes."

"But you don't know when? You didn't see him go?"

"No—no, to both."

"You were together all evening?"

"Yes."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"You didn't know Dikty was there, was tailing?"

"No. I hadn't seen Mr. Dikty all day."

"Where did you pick up Nash?"

"At the library. He invited me to dinner—or maybe I invited him. I can't remember now!"

"What happened after you left the library?"

"We walked along the street to his car and he drove me out to his house."

"No stops?"

"No, no stops. I cooked dinner."

"What about after dinner? What happened then?"

"He showed me his library."

"Then what?" Cummings snapped.

"We played records and I looked at the—the pictures."

"Pictures. . . ?"

"He has dozens of them. Old prints of Egyptian scenes, Babylonian scenes—everything."

"What was he doing all this time?"

"Reading. In the chair behind me."

"All the time? He never left the chair?"

"Sometimes I would look up and he wouldn't be there."

"Gone from the room do you mean?"

"Yes," she answered miserably.

"How long was he gone?"

"I don't know. I'm afraid I didn't pay much attention. The hours slipped by—sometimes he would be there, and sometimes not. I can't tell you how long he was gone."

Cummings grunted sourly.

"Pictures," he said skeptically. "After the pictures—what?"

"We sat and talked."

"What about?"

"History—I mean prehistory. All about Gilgamesh, and Noah, and the ice age, and the Azilians—"

"What's that?"

"Prehistoric men who lived in Europe. Thousands of years ago."

"Just talking? All that time?"

"Just talking, until I realized how late it was. He was going to drive me back to town."

"And then?"

"And then he opened the door and I saw . . . I saw . . ." Glaring memories rushed to the front of her mind. She failed to repress a shudder. "Mr. Dikty—dead."

"What did Nash do?"

"He ran down the steps, turned him over."

"Did you see the lipstick?"

"No, not then. Some policeman pointed it out later. I looked then."

"You don't know if the lipstick was there when Nash turned the body over?"

"No. All I could see was . . . was . . ."

"Did you ever see Dikty with another woman? Someone who was not his wife?"

"No, I never did. He wasn't that kind of a man."

"Some woman smeared lipstick on his mouth," Cummings said bitingly. "And somebody strangled him."

Hoffman didn't bother to answer. Her head had sunk nearly to the desktop.

"All right," Cummings said desperately, "what happened after he turned the body over?"

"He said something I couldn't understand."

"In a foreign language, do you mean? What did it sound like—French? German? Spanish?"

"It didn't sound like anything I'd heard before. He said two or three words—angry words." She briefly raised her head to stare at the supervisor. "I could tell he was angry, terribly angry."

"So am I," Cummings snapped at her. "What next? What did he do?"

"He put his fingers—his hand, I guess, inside Mr. Dikty's coat a moment, and said he was dead. He told me to go back in the house and call the police."

"And you did. Without first calling me."

"Yes. I didn't think of you, then." She rubbed her hands across her face. "Everything was so—so mad and whirling."

"What did Nash do?"

"I don't know. I don't remember seeing him again."

"You stayed in the house until the police arrived?"

Hoffman nodded.

"And the police gave you the works." He glanced at her briefly, studied the top of her head. "I apologize for that," he said suddenly, softly. "I can imagine how you felt in jail. If the dumb fools had bothered to compare your lipstick to that smeared on the body, they'd have seen the difference. I apologize, Hoffman. And they'll sweat for it."

She dropped her head to the desk. "Oh, don't bother."

"Did you make plans to meet again?"

"I was to see him again today. No definite plan, or place. But I told him I'd see him."

"He agreed?"

"Yes."

"Do you think he'll still keep that date?"

"I don't know. I haven't had time to think about it. He said—oh!" She jerked upright, startled. "You'll arrest

him! If he comes to see me, you'll arrest him."

"Of course. I can't think of better bait."

"But that isn't fair!"

Cummings got up from the desk, stood off to look at her. "Which side are you on?"

She glared at him for a bewildered moment and suddenly burst into tears.

"Stop that!" he commanded. "I can't stand that."

She only dropped her head to the desk and continued crying. Cummings sat down, placing the tips of his index fingers together above the ridge of his nose.

It wasn't Nash, damn the man. It wasn't Nash, despite the fact that the murder occurred on his property while he was only a few feet away. No—it wasn't Nash. It was a woman. What woman? There was only one woman involved in this grisly mess. Hodgkins's widow. Why?

Cummings felt a vague notion that he was caught up in something not of his own doing, caught in something he couldn't comprehend or understand.

"Hoffman. . . ?"

She raised her head. "Yes?"

"You'd better go home and get some sleep; you're not worth a plugged penny to me the way you are now."

"I'm beat," she confessed. "Really beat. That was horrible!"

A trace of sympathy crept into his voice. "Get a cab and go on home. Shoo."

She came around the desk to lay a hesitant hand on his arm. "Mr. Cummings, I've let you down terribly. I had built such dreams. . . . When you told me I could work on the case with you, told me to call Mr. Dikty my cousin if trouble should come—well—I'm afraid I thought I would set the world on fire; I know better now."

Cummings lifted her drooping chin and smiled at her dulled eyes, haggard face. "A night in jail can kill the dreams in anyone."

Shirley Hoffman walked out of the office.

Cummings listened to the girl's retreating footsteps in the corridor. He sat down rather heavily on a corner of the desk and picked up the phone, twirling a number on the dial by long and easy habit. An instrument at some far end was lifted from its cradle.

"Grove?" he asked the phone. "This is Cummings, in Knoxville. Can you send me two men on the afternoon plane? Good. Yes, they'll do. I've got a pair of suspects here and they've got to be found soon. And Grove, send about twenty-five thousand in cash with them. I want to take care of a widow and some kids. What? Yes—Dikty. Last night. Pass the news along to the boss. And, can you send out a new office girl on the same plane? This one is a dead loss; we'll have to replace her."

Cummings contemplated the sun on his shoes.

XI

COME out in the open, Carolyn—you're hiding in there somewhere.

Nash perched on the hillside, surveying the lights of the sleeping city spread out beneath him.

Carolyn was in there—somewhere.

She was secreted there, safely hidden away from the prying eyes of the police, from Cummings, from himself. And *that* rankled. Secreted from him, the only one of all the billions of people in the world who actually knew her, had known her a long, long time.

There was no evidence that she had slipped out of town and, until tonight, none that she had stayed. But she had, as the second death proved.

She had killed with a swift and sure purpose. She had kissed Dikty to suck his mind of information, and then she had killed him. Carolyn had remained on the scene all these past weeks while the search continued. It was she who had been following him as he followed the plodding Dikty, she whose eyes had bored into the back of his skull with malevolent intensity. She had been following Dikty—and Nash had fallen into

line between. Then Dikty must have been close to her, dangerously close.

Nash hugged the overgrown hillside, squinting into the darkness. Dikty *had* discovered her hiding place. And paid with his life.

He knew about Carolyn, although he had not seen her for ten thousand years—not since before the wreck. He remembered the woman as one of the navigation crew; given a ship and the power, she was quite capable of charting a route to any point in creation. The stars had changed in their courses in ten thousand years, but not enough to prevent Carolyn from finding her way home again.

It was Carolyn who, in her ten thousand years of life had been worshipped as a goddess by many primitive tribes. He had found traces of her existence in his exhaustive studies of archeology and anthropology. He was very close to her at Peenemunde, but she had slipped away. He was closer now, closer than he had been at any time since the ship met its death in space ten-thousand years before. He knew she was in the United States when he landed on the shore, knew what her destination would be.

And so he had drifted to Oak Ridge to await her appearance. And one day a bewildered physicist had come to him for consultation. And Carolyn was pegged.

She was not content to stay here, to spend her remaining though shortened years on a paradise planet. She yearned mightily to return home, to her native world where she might yet outwit death in a reversion to the natural waters of her kind. Carolyn was younger than he, Nash reflected. Younger, less mature, more impulsive.

Dikty, of all men, had found her hiding place.

YOU'RE down there, Carolyn, down there somewhere in the maze of lighted streets or surrounding patches of darkness. But *where*, damn you, where?

Nash dropped his eyes from the distant scene, to stare at the looming,

indistinct whiteness of his hands before him. Shirley Hoffman: *good-by* probably, or at the very least, *so long*. To go back to her now for whatever reason would place her in a position of jeopardy, would force her to choose between him and her sworn loyalties. He did not want to force such a decision upon her. Still, he fervently hoped their paths might cross again someday, somewhere in the future. He would deem it a stroke of rare fortune to meet that girl again during her long lifetime.

Hoffman was due for some rough handling, he thought. He felt proud of the girl—quite proud. It was fatuously pleasing to discover some of his own character traits recurring in her, and he wondered briefly how long it might be before she guessed the truth?

Nash had all the information he really needed to know—except one thing. How had Dikty found Carolyn's hiding place where all others had failed? What morsel of evidence did Dikty possess that the others did not which had led to his murder?

Nash waited on the darkened hillside. In memory he retraced the patternless path he and Dikty had strewn along the afternoon streets, seeking a clue to Carolyn. . . .

IN THE first false light of dawn, Nash quit his position on the hill. Fifteen minutes' slow, careful walking brought him to the steep ravine where he had ditched his smashed car. He continued to descend the rugged hillside.

He went with the wry memory of the hundreds or perhaps thousands of times he had done the same thing in the past, always fleeing something or someone.

In all those ten thousand years of cultural evolution—Azilian, Tardenosian, Maglemosian, the Campignian, Ertebolle, Asturian (as men now named them), the later Egyptian, Crete, Min-oan—in all those ten thousand years he had been forced to run from something, sometime. As he was running now, from men who believed he posed a threat to their national security.

The boy's sudden voice startled him. "Hey there—where ya' going?"

Nash looked up, discovered the boy just across a fence. The lad was plodding along behind a small herd of cattle, and had twisted around to stare at Nash in his hasty descent of the hill.

"Hello," Nash called back. "I didn't see you. Going down to find a garage. My car's in the ditch up there." He pointed a vague thumb behind him.

"Where?" the boy asked curiously.

"You know that gravel road—the one that looks like a corkscrew? Near a lot of pink-and-black rocks. I'm in the ditch up there."

"Sure, I know that place. You didn't get hurt?"

"No, I'm all right. Just taking a short cut down into town."

"There ain't no short cut that way," the boy declared.

"No?" Nash paused to inspect the terrain, hoping the youngster wouldn't mention this incident to his parents. "Do you know a better one?"

"Sure," the lad replied with positive superiority. "Just climb over the fence and cut across here and go down there by them trees—" he turned to point out the grove—"and you'll see a path. Just follow that around by the Norwood place—and pretty soon you'll come out right behind that trailer court down there. They got a phone."

"I'll do that, and many thanks."

"Be sure to watch out for the dogs, now."

"Will do. And thanks again." Nash climbed the fence and struck out across the pasture. He was among the shelter of the trees before the deeper significance of the boy's statement smote him. The trailer court had a phone.

Sudden thought: Carolyn? Living in a trailer? A perfect set-up!

Nash moved more swiftly along the downward path, threading his way among the trees and into the open country beyond them. The sun was breaking the horizon before he sighted the trailer court. Nash stopped on the hill to study the layout.

It was modern and of good size, having crushed rock for streets and individual walks up to each trailer door. Two sides of the court, those sides facing away from town and toward the outlying hills, were lined with head-high shrubbery and young trees; the third side lay open, looking down upon the city, while the remaining boundary faced the road. Nash sat down with his back to a tree, watching the camp and studying the trailers one by one.

By midmorning he was down to a half-dozen trailers which hadn't yet given any sign of life or movement.

At noon, one of the half dozen was eliminated.

It was dark. Three trailers remained, three mute question marks. Two parked near the shrub-lined boundary before him and a third nearer the road.

Tired, legs cramped and stomach demanding food, Nash arose from the ground and moved slowly down the hill. The night around him was filled with tiny cricket noises and somewhere near at hand a bird was calling. A brick building set against the rear shrubline housed a public bath, and Nash stopped there first for water, after working his way through the trees and shrubbery. The water helped a bit but still his hunger clamored for attention.

Nash left the building and edged toward the nearer trailer that had claimed his interest.

The first of the three silent trailers came beneath his questioning fingers, still faintly warm from the day's hot sun. It was a long, low streamlined vehicle, sparkling silver and maroon when seen by daylight. At a window he stopped, twisted his face up to read a notice pasted there. *For Sale*. Nash hesitated only a moment more and then boldly stepped to the door and tried the knob. It turned easily and the panel swung open on emptiness.

Within fleet seconds he was beside the second one. Using the same cautious approach as before, Nash worked his way around to the trailer door and tapped lightly. There was no answer. He tapped

again and at the same time gently twisted the knob. The door was locked. Nash swung back into the concealing shrubbery and made his way toward the third and last trailer—that one nearest the road.

IT TOO was silent—as dark, as seemingly lifeless as it had been all the long day. There was no movement from within, no sound. Nash knew the silent darkness of it was a lie. The door of the trailer stood open as if to welcome him and only a light screen door protected the interior from night-flying insects. Despite the absence of sound or motion the stillness was a lie, for there was the tempting odor of food. He lifted his nostrils to the odor, moved a single step nearer the screen. Abruptly there came a hissing sound and before he could jerk away there came still another—that of a suddenly bubbling percolator. Within a moment the odor of the steaming coffee was carried through the screen to him.

Nash grinned tightly and stepped to the screen door; he could see nothing at all in the blackened interior.

He said, "I've come, Carolyn."

Her answer came promptly, a husky feminine voice from the trailer's interior. "I've been waiting for you, Gilbert. Waiting all day."

Nash nodded, still with the tight, knowing grin on his lips. "All day." The sound of her voice wiped out the millenniums as though they had never been. "All day."

"I discovered you up there watching me. You have the patience of a mule, Gilbert. And the intelligence."

He reached for the screen door.

XII

CLOSE the door," the low voice commanded him, "and turn on the lights. I want to look at you, mule."

Nash pushed the door shut behind him and fumbled along the wall until his fingers found the light switch. "Put away the gun, Carolyn," he suggested,

and flipped the wall switch. The sudden brightness caused him to squint.

She sat casually relaxed, confidently smiling, on a long divan that filled the front of the trailer, stretching across the room from wall to wall. She was attired in light green lounging pajamas which seemed to hug and caress her body, to display and accent her physical endowments. Carolyn held an automatic in her hand.

Nash simply stood and looked at her, looked at the crown of flowing golden hair which now seemed somewhat lighter than he remembered, looked at the glowing yellow eyes which had lost none of their fiery magnetism. The smooth skin of her face was—if you knew what to search for—only now beginning to show signs of age, but the tiny wrinkles and indentations had not yet appeared on her neck or her hands. He looked at her hands, at the gun held in one of them, looked closely at the clinging green garment she wore and all that it pretended to conceal, stared at her and through her with the accumulated curiosity of ten thousand years. She was disturbingly attractive, provocative. He could easily understand how Gregg Hodgkins had fallen under her spell. Hodgkins and how many others? And *this* stage was set for him. Carolyn had carefully prepared for still another conquest.

Nash relaxed against the doorsill. "It's been a long time, Carolyn."

"Don't be melodramatic, Gilbert. I appreciate neither the irony nor the understatement. And don't just stand there; sit down." Her voice was low and coaxing as she patted the divan. "Over here."

He studied her a moment more, studied her eyes and the gun in her hand, the stage she had set for the two of them, finally to turn away from her and seat himself on a straightback chair beside a tiny table. A meal awaited him there and he examined it with interest—a browned steak still slowly sizzling on its plate, nearly a half dozen side dishes, and at his elbow the auto-

matic percolator ceased its mad bubbling and shut itself off. In all, much more than he could possibly eat although he had touched nothing since the previous evening. Nash examined each dish on the table and swung his gaze back to the woman.

"Homey," he said.

"Aren't you hungry, Gilbert?"

"You know damned well I am!" The old, tight grin had reappeared.

"I fixed it for you when I saw you leave the hill. We can talk while you eat, Gilbert."

"I'm sure you did—really fixed it!"

She frowned at him. "Oh, don't be silly! Why would I want to kill you?"

Nash glanced down at the gun. "Why, indeed?"

Carolyn continued to frown, half angry at his insinuation. She became aware that her gaze had drifted to the untouched food on the table and quickly forced her attention back to him. "Aren't you going to eat it? After I went to all the trouble? Gilbert, you must be starving."

"What was that crack about irony?" he wanted to know.

"Please!" she retorted sharply, "let's not quarrel—not you and me. It's been too long a time, Gilbert, and we're all that are left. Let's be friends—please?"

Nash gently moved aside the steak plate and propped an elbow on the table. "All right; we're friends—for a little while." He glanced again at the gun.

"How are you, Carolyn?"

"Fine, thank you. And you?"

"Just fine."

After that . . . silence.

"Let's talk," Carolyn suggested un- easily.

"Let's," Nash agreed. "About what?"

"About us—and the others. Gilbert, do you realize how *long* it has been? We are the only ones left, aren't we? I was afraid so. I'm *so* glad I found you; there were times when I wanted to kill myself because of the loneliness! Gilbert, it was terrible." Her hands were moving restlessly in her lap, striking her knees to emphasize the emotions behind her

words. The gun always managed to remain pointed at him. "I'm glad you came through all right."

He nodded.

"What of your wife—Astarte?"

"Died in the explosion," he answered without emotion. "Didn't have time to fasten her suit."

"Oh." A moment's thoughtful silence. "And the others?"

Nash slowly blinked his eyes, inhaling the aroma of the coffee beside him. "There was Raul—you remember Raul? Ship's doctor? He died a short while ago in Egypt, an old, old man. Died happy, you might say. Raul was the first to tell me about you, incidentally; he'd heard stories drifting up from the south and we speculated on who might be causing them." He closed one eye, stared at her with the other. "Some stories."

She made no answer.

"And there was Santun, the second officer," Nash went on. "Santun was the only fool in the lot—he committed suicide in a Roman arena when he realized he was marooned here for the rest of his life. Raul and I were unwilling witnesses." The teasing odor of the coffee haunted his nostrils though he tried to ignore it. "And Leef, the geologist—he came out of the wreck too. Leef wasn't as lucky as some of the rest of us; he froze to death when he fell in the snow country, far to the north. I never saw him again." Nash suddenly shifted in the chair, turning his back on the table and the coffee. Carolyn was watching him with a tiny smile. The gun lay carelessly in her lap.

"I also discovered a girl named Brunna—did you know her?" He let his eyes close to shut out temporarily the sight of Carolyn. "Brunna worked with motors but her real interest was anthropology. Can you guess where I found her? In the mountains back of Afghanistan, searching for the source of life of these people." He spread his hand in a half-circle to encompass the trailer court and the city beyond. "She seemed to think she had found it, in the place

they call Tibet. Are you interested in all this?" He didn't bother to open his eyes and see if she were interested, or to wait for a spoken answer. "Brunna and I enjoyed each other; we were seriously considering marriage when she was caught up by the soldiers of some Minoan king. Brunna was given alive to a lion, to appease some legendary lion-goddess." His eyes snapped open and he swung back to Carolyn. "This goddess was a bloodthirsty witch."

The silence came again.

After a while Carolyn asked coolly, "All of us in that one hemisphere? None here?"

"Apparently not; that part of the world was directly beneath the ship when it cracked up. I thought I had found some traces here in the new world but they proved to be only imitations. No—none here, until we came."

"Were there no more?" Carolyn asked then. "Only Raul, and Santun, Leef and Brunna, you and I? Is that all?" There was no hint of an emotion in her husky voice. "Six out of three hundred! I would have liked seeing them again."

"You were too busy being a white goddess," he answered laconically.

"Not I," she told him.

"No—not you," he mocked. "I've been quite interested in you, Carolyn. When I could, I followed you over most of the world although I did not always know your identity. When I reached southern Africa you had long gone and your little empire there had blown away with the winds; by the time I returned to the Mediterranean you had also been there, to vanish once again. But *there* you left a few things behind that had not blown away." His hard stare bored into hers. "The dances, the bulls and the lions, the feasts of blood. Those things came from Ichor, Carolyn, and few of our ship's company had ever visited Ichor." He shrugged and half turned away. "So much time passed without my finding you that at last I decided you were dead, like Raul, like Leef, like the other two. I had really given you up for

lost—until the rocket experiments started in Germany.

"I very nearly caught you in Germany, Carolyn. It may have only been a matter of weeks, even days, that I missed you, again. And then when I learned of the theft of the forty-five quarts of water during this last war, I knew you had gone, and guessed where you were going. So—I followed you here, prepared for your eventual discovery. And here we are."

"Yes, mule, here we are. I wondered how long you would need to get around to that." She stretched, moving her slim legs in provocative fashion. "Here we are, you and I, the last two alive in a world of savages. And so . . .?"

He lifted his head to stare at a point above her, to stare into the past.

"You are evil, Carolyn. The swathe of death and destruction you've left behind you cannot be denied; your black record is a blot on the civilization and the world that gave you birth. Carolyn, you might have been born on Ichor, so far have you gone. You killed Brunna, you killed your husband and you killed again yesterday." Nash brought his eyes down to lock with hers. "You will kill again tonight if you are able."

The gun was at attention, aimed at his heart.

"And you, mule? You are going to play the judge?"

He shook his head.

"Policeman, then? You will be a policeman?"

"No, there are no police in our life; I wouldn't have the stomach for it if there were. I couldn't hand you over to the authorities here because I know what they would do to you—and that would be equal to killing you myself. I couldn't hang you, or whatever punishment they deal out to murderers in this state. I will not be a party to that."

"That's very considerate of you, mule." She was laughing at him. "You must be fairly bursting with noble humility. But you followed me here for *some* purpose! You admitted it. Didn't you?"

"Yes. To offer you a choice."

"Still being noble," she retorted bitingly. "A choice of what?"

"Of remaining here with me in this world. And of forsaking your evil ways if you do remain."

"That isn't all of it!" she snapped, the laughter suddenly gone. "What is the alternative?"

"Why," he said simply, "of continuing on your way—of going wherever you think you are going."

She sat up with astonishment. "You call *that* a choice?"

"Where do you think you're going, Carolyn? Your husband didn't know the purpose or the ultimate destination of that ship. And I don't believe Dikty knew it." Suddenly he smiled at her. "You'd be wise to accept my offer."

"Oh, you fool, you utter fool! You've lived among the savages for so long their stupidity has rubbed off on you. You're offering me a choice of nothing!"

"I'm offering you a choice between life and death," he contradicted her softly.

"You lie! You have nothing to offer."

"Carolyn," Nash said gently, "I can't hang you; you know that as a result of my early training I can't harm you in any way unless it be in self-defense. Despite what you've done to Brunna, to those others, I can't kill you for it. You know that and you are laughing at me." He lowered his voice. "Carolyn, this I can do: I *can* let you commit suicide if you desire."

She laughed at him then, a husky, raucous sound that filled the trailer cabin with mocking noise. "And do you think, noble mule, that I am about to commit suicide? Like your Santun?"

Nash waited patiently until she had stopped laughing. "Yes," he told her.

Carolyn sobered, stared hard at him. "Have you forgotten my profession so soon? Have you forgotten that I was a navigator?"

"No, I haven't forgotten that."

"Do you doubt my ability to take that ship up?"

"There's an element of chance involved!"

"Of course there's an element of chance involved!" she blazed. "An element of chance is involved every time a ship takes to the sky, anywhere, any time. A thousand chances are run on a thousand ships every day! Why do you think we're here now, throwing away our lives on this stinking ball of mud? Of course there's a risk—I expect it, I'll take it.

"Listen to me, Gilbert Nash: there's a ship out there on the desert that I helped to build, helped to design and power! A ship capable of taking me home. I paid a high price for that ship! I crammed knowledge and discovery into Hodgkins's miserable little head until I was sick at the sight of him, sick of his stupidity and his maudlin gibberish; I fed him technical data until he could have powered that ship with his eyes closed. I coaxed him, flattered him, educated him, forced him to build that reaction motor. I wanted to go home! And I'm going—alone."

"Alone, yes." Nash nodded. "I expected that."

"Did you think for a second that I'd take you?"

"You couldn't afford to take me, Carolyn. I'd talk—if we got back." The yellow eyes held her fixed in serious study. "You wouldn't want stories about you circulated at home. Not these stories."

"They will have given us up for lost, Gilbert. And they will be glad to find the one last survivor."

"You."

She nodded. "Me."

"I can picture the gala homecoming," he said dryly. "You'll make a production of it."

"I will pay glowing tribute to your memory, dear mule." She moved like a kitten on the divan, arching her back and smiling at him. "Yours, and poor little Brunna—Santun—Leef—yes, even Raul. You will be heroes, dead heroes buried on a miserable, insignificant ball of mud. It will be a memorable day when I return home."

"If you return home," he said.

"Are you still doubting my ability? I can take that ship up; I can pilot it!"

"The ship," he pointed out, "will be radio-controlled from base. It will fly on a preset course."

"The ship," she mocked him prettily, "can easily be disconnected from its radio controls." She leaned forward, tapped her knee with emphasis. "Don't pretend to stupidity, Gilbert. Are you familiar with the navigation charts? Do you know where in the universe we are?"

"I lack your specialized knowledge, Carolyn."

"All I need to do, doubting mule, is to blast a certain number of degrees above this system's elliptical plane to reach our trade routes. Our ships are up there now—they're up there all the time—running past this solar system as though it didn't exist. We were on course, Gilbert, when the ship cracked up and we fell here. We were following a well-marked, well-used trade route."

"And that ship of mine out there on the desert will carry me out of this system, carry me up to the trade routes where I will be found. I'm not going to the moon, or to whatever destination that ship is set for. Gilbert, I'm going home!"

"Supposing you aren't found right away?"

"I don't expect to be found right away. I will have what food I can carry, and I have a cache of drugs. If need be, I'll put myself into deepsleep and wait it out. I'm going to stay alive in that ship until I'm found!"

Nash shrugged. "You seem to believe you know all the answers."

"I've had ten thousand years to figure them out," she retorted sarcastically. "And the last ten to perfect them. My late lamented husband would be surprised if he knew—really *knew*—the motor he thought he made. That motor is outsized, outsized and shielded; it requires a ship to contain it, not one of those primitive instrument rockets. It was deliberately designed outside because it would have to carry me as well.

And, listen well: in perfectly useless pockets it contains heavy water as supposed moderators, water I will drain off. The only thing for my comfort I could not put 'into that motor was food. I must risk that."

"Sounds fine," Nash said laconically. "Did you work in a signal too?"

Carolyn laughed delightedly. "That motor will give off an alarm that can be heard all over the universe! It will command attention. In space, uncharted obstacles don't radiate an alarm."

"You almost make me want to go along," he told her. "Almost. Your sales appeal lacks something."

The woman shook her head. "You aren't going, Gilbert. I'm sure I will miss you."

"I'm sure," he replied. "And so you are going to steal a heavily guarded ship and take off?"

"Gilbert!" She sat stiffly upright, searching his face. "Gilbert, I don't like the way you said that. Were you thinking of stopping me? Of warning them?" She lifted the gun significantly.

"Me?" he asked innocently, and grinned without humor. "Of course not." He settled back on the chair and hooked his thumbs in his belt, contemplating her. "Your actions are disgusting to me; I'll never forgive you for murdering Brunna. But I'm not going to stop you, or warn anyone." He blinked at her. "I offered you a choice a few moments ago. It's still open: commit suicide if you wish."

Carolyn suddenly leaped to her feet, staring at him.

"Gilbert . . ."

"Yes?" He knew what was coming.

"Will you kiss me? Or . . .?" She gestured.

"No."

"Please, Gilbert! I must—"

"You have an idea that you *may* be committing suicide," he told her. "You want me to kiss you, to find out for you. No."

She ran her hand over the buttons on the pajama blouse. "Gilbert."

"No."

Carolyn waited there for a long, indecisive moment, glaring at him with vexation. From somewhere outside, some nearby trailer, came the muted sounds of a radio and the crying of a baby. Beyond that a truck could be heard moving along the road with heavily growling motor. Still the woman stood, her fiery eyes fixed on the man's passive face. It was then that she remembered the automatic in her hand.

"I could force you."

"You could try."

"I *could*!" she insisted.

"Try then, and see what happens," he invited. "Take one step, Carolyn, and I'll act in self-defense. You can't very well pilot that ship with both arms broken. Try it—and I'll send you to the hospital for the next month. Your ship will be in the sky by the end of that time." He hadn't moved, hadn't unlocked his fingers from behind his head.

"Gilbert, this is silly! All I want to do is—"

"All you want to do is kiss me. All you want to do is pluck from my mind the knowledge of whether you will live beyond next week. All you want me to do is look into your evil mind for you." Nash grinned with an inner satisfaction. "They have a phrase in this country. Go to hell."

"You won't do that for me?"

"I won't do anything for you unless you accept my offer—the one choice. Remain here."

She stamped her foot in anger. "Mule!"

"I may as well leave," Nash suggested. "We don't seem to be getting anywhere."

"Gilbert . . ." She was on the divan, sitting at stiff attention. "You aren't going to warn them?"

"I've told you twice, Carolyn, I will not prevent your committing suicide. No, I won't warn them—there's no need to. Do you know anything at all about White Sands? Know how well it's guarded? The radar will find you first and flash a warning to the motor patrols. Or the fence will detect you; the place

is surrounded by a very simple electronic fence, Carolyn. If so little as a coyote wanders near that fence, the presence of his body alters the electrical current passing through it and that alteration is registered on the alarm meters. My warnings would be wasted. No, I won't try to stop you."

Carolyn regarded him with distaste. "Your thinking patterns have fallen into human channels, mule. Slovenly. You and I aren't human, remember? We can force our will on others, or have you forgotten? Peenemunde was well guarded too, fantastically guarded. And yet I stood fifteen feet away, on the arm of an officer, watching the assembly of a firing mechanism while the rocket lay in its launching cradle." She was laughing at him again. "The bold and open approach is the most successful—the seemingly honest one. I will not go near your wonderful fence, not be found on the desert by radar. Give me more credit than that, Gilbert."

He said humorously, "Going to walk right up and say 'good morning,' I suppose?"

"I am, yes." There was a defiance in her manner. "Or something very near to that. I've had ten years to establish a second identity."

Nash did not try to conceal the jolt of that. He sat up on the chair, peering at her. He realized very belatedly that he had underestimated Carolyn Hodgkins. He gave her full credit for the force that had caused her husband to design and build a reaction motor, although he knew it wasn't as good as she thought because she simply didn't have the training. And he gave her due credit for propelling her husband into the right places, to enable him to work on such a motor. Carolyn had accomplished much that was both good and evil in ten thousand years. But he had underestimated her in this one particular; it had never occurred to him that she might have just as carefully prepared a place for herself at White Sands, as she had prepared a ship for her expected journey. He *was* thinking in human patterns! If Carolyn had

waited ten thousand years for this moment, and had spent ten years in planning it, she would certainly not leave the final step to blind chance.

"So that's why you would take those vacations away from your husband," he said wonderingly. "And that's why he never knew where you were going or how long you would be gone." Of course. Her free and unchallenging entry into the place had been previously prepared, had come before the ship and the motor to allay suspicion. "You were out there, playing another role."

"Gilbert," she exclaimed with evident surprise, "that shook you?"

"Did, yes," he admitted. "I don't see—"

"Oh, you poor plodding fool!" she jeered. "You *have* become like these savages. It's just as well I'm not taking you back with me—you really belong here." She pretended a false pity for his waning intelligence, making a small face for him. "I prepared another identity for myself years ago, as soon as I found an opening. Prepared it well and it is unquestioned today. Humans are terrible weaklings—they seem to believe that strength lies in secrecy and are blind to the weaknesses that walk hand in hand with secrecy. Surely you know human weaknesses, mule? How else do you move about so freely?"

"I've purchased passports," he answered, "and forged them too. They worship money." He gestured beyond her toward the door. "But still . . ."

"My presence on the desert is unquestioned," she replied to his unspoken thought. "And my long absences are unremarked—thanks to the secrecy fetish. You would be quite surprised to observe how easily I may enter and leave White Sands—quite surprised!"

"Airtight?" he demanded. "Leak-proof?"

"That other identity? Absolutely. As trustworthy as the ship I'm going to hurl into space, Gilbert. The two are inseparable."

Nash gaped at her.

The quick second shock followed hard

on the heels of the first, knocking him off his mental balance. She was in at White Sands. "Why—Carolyn!" he exclaimed in involuntary astonishment. He could not conceal the glint of dawning admiration in his eyes, admiration for her sheer audacity. And then, unaccountably, he laughed. Laughed aloud at what she had said and what it meant. He knew, with sudden and smashing certainty, what that second identity was. In truth, Carolyn had taken advantage of the secrecy fetish, placing herself in a position where few others could possibly recognize her as Hodekins's wife.

What a rude shock one of the Cummings's fellow supervisors was in for.

"Well I'll be double damned!" he declared, and then apologized. "That's another phrase they use around here." He stood up. "Carolyn, you're a wonder—and too much for me. You'll never know what you've just done to me." He moved toward the door. "I'm leaving."

Carolyn whipped up the gun on steady line with his eyes. "You are not leaving." Slowly she arose from the divan, taking care to keep him covered with the automatic.

"I'm leaving," he repeated. "This is finished."

"You can't leave! You'll talk, Gilbert; you'll ruin my chances of escape. You're staying here."

"I promised you—" he began.

"I can't afford to accept your promises," she cut him off curtly. "Not now, not this late. You refused to kiss me, you wouldn't let me see into your mind." Her index finger caressed the trigger. "My one hope of continuing life is sitting out there on the desert, waiting for me to seize it. My ship will be complete in a matter of days, complete and ready to jump, and *then* I'll be on my way home after an eternity of waiting. I can't afford to accept your promises, Gilbert Nash—I can't afford any more risks. I'm going and you are staying. Here, in this cabin."

"Through the mouth?" he asked quietly, "like your dear departed husband?"

"Where you stand!"

They faced each other, tense and waiting. With her own growing tension Carolyn tightened the grip on the trigger. Nash dropped his eyes, concentrated on the muscles of that hand. When he spoke he did not raise his eyes to her face.

"I can kill you in self-defense, Carolyn."

"You can't move faster than a bullet."

He knew that, knew that she was taunting him. "Just the two of us, out of a crew of three hundred," he warned her. "I don't want to be the last survivor."

"You won't be!"

Her voice betrayed her. He realized that she was squeezing the trigger. Nash jumped. Not at her, as she expected, but sideways toward the door. His body hit the frail panel with a resounding thud and the booming explosion of the automatic was like an echo. The slug tore into his ear, bit into the side of his skull.

Nash tumbled through the doorway to fall on the crushed rock spread outside. Someone screamed.

XIII

EETHER and flowers. . . .

The flowers were pink roses, a large bunch standing in a yellow vase. The vase rested on a window sill and beyond the sill were the graceful swaying tops of trees, of blue summer sky. A face hung somewhere near the roses and the window, hung over the back of a chair, a face which smelled of ether and pink roses. Nash squinted at it, blinked and looked again.

Cummings said, "It's about time."

He sat on a chair that had been turned about, staring at the bed. His arms were folded across the chair top and his face seemed to be resting on his arms.

"Sorry to have troubled you," Nash said weakly.

"People here are a little worried."

"About me?" Nash guessed.

"About you. Something about non-conformity."

"I was afraid of that," Nash confessed.

"I'm also concerned with the same, very much concerned." There was a faint touch of bitterness to his voice. "But I have to wait; the damned doctors hold jurisdiction here. I'm generously allowed fifteen minutes when you wake up."

Nash tried to nod. "*When* I do."

"You haven't yet. My fifteen minutes haven't started. And so I'm concerned about this nonconformity. People here are somewhat upset by a double heart and a double circulatory system. They fail to understand the absence of a vermiform appendix. One or two of them were extremely agitated over the activity or nonactivity of certain endocrine glands." Cummings pursed his lips. "Now me, I'm not too much bothered by details like that because they don't mean much to me. The details are only that—details, added, make the whole. The nonconformity of the whole puzzles me." The head moved on the crossed arms, peering at the man on the bed.

"I'll probably disappoint you," Nash replied, "but I can't help it or explain it. That's the way it is."

"That's the way *what* is?"

"Whatever you're talking about."

Cummings fell silent for a moment, and then tried a different tack.

"Wife took a shot at you, eh?"

"Not my wife."

"No? My apologies. Sister, maybe?"

"No relation—for which I'm thankful."

"Where did she go?" Cummings asked then.

"I didn't have time to watch," Nash retorted dryly. "Things moved rather fast last night."

"Last night?" The face hanging over the chair lit up in amusement. "Last night was eight days ago."

"*What?*"

"Eight days ago. You seem to have been out of touch with the world; may-

be I'd better bring you up to date. You lack a complete ear now, you know, and a bit of your skull. On the other hand you've gained a silver plate—back here." He indicated a spot on the side of his head. "Oh yes—and you had a mouthful of crushed rock. That must have been quite a farewell party last night. It all added up to eight days."

Nash burst out with, "Did the—"

"Did the what?" Cummings followed curiously.

"Nothing."

"Did the *something*," the other persisted. "Did the woman get away from us again? Yes, she did. We don't seem very efficient, do we? Did the trailer-court proprietor raise hell? Yes, he did; you frightened away some of the tenants. Did the farm boy up the hill tell us the story about your ditched car? Yes, he did—he went up to have a look himself and the location was wrong. Did the what?"

"Did the lady take her trailer with her?"

"The lady took nothing but the clothes on her back—"

"Indeed?"

"Indeed."

Nash laughed weakly and found that it hurt.

Cummings shushed him. "Our fifteen minutes haven't started yet. You aren't awake."

"Thanks." He looked toward the window. "Roses?"

"Hoffman."

"Nice girl."

"Useless girl. Thanks to you."

"I'm sorry—really am."

"She went in head over heels."

"I suspected that, and intended to stop it."

"Why?" Cummings asked candidly.

"Hell," Nash said, "I'm old enough to be her grandfather!"

"Oh, I don't know," the supervisor said quietly. "Not more than forty, according to your police papers."

"All right then, father."

"I'd judge about thirty, looking at you."

"I feel like an old man."

"My friend," the agent said confidently, leaning forward. "you're going to feel one hell of a lot older when this hospital releases you and I get through with you! One hell of a lot older!"

"Cheerful prospect," Nash assured him. "Makes me want to get out of bed now."

"Oh, take your time, take your time. Relax and enjoy yourself; let the pretty nurses wait on you. It'll be your last rest for a long, long time, my friend. I'm going to put you through the works, I promise you!" The head remained motionless over the back of the chair but a smile appeared, a hollow, ghastly smile. "I'm going to ask questions and you are going to answer them—believe me, you'll answer them. You'll start by telling me where you came from, and why. You'll tell me how and where you landed in this country, and when. You'll furnish minute detail of each and every hour of your life from the moment you were born until 'last night' eight days ago when an ambulance driver picked you off the ground. You'll tell me your exact purpose for being here and exact reason for locating in this city. You'll tell me everything you know about the woman who married Gregg Hodgkins; why she married him, what her connection is to you, and why the two of you conspired to murder him. You'll tell me why the two of you murdered Dikty, why the two of you finally quarreled and she attempted to murder you."

Nash looked across at him. "I think you mean it."

THERE was a clatter of quick steps and a flurry of white at the door. A young nurse put her head in to discover Nash awake. "Well! And how is our patient?" She glanced at her watch. "My, but you've been sleeping." She threw a fast glare at Cummings. "Why didn't you call me?" Back to Nash. "Do you want anything? Resting comfortably?" Again to Cummings. "I think you'd better leave now." And finally to Nash. "How are you?"

He answered, "Hello," and let it go at that.

Cummings tried to explain. "He just a minute ago woke up. He said to me—"

"I thought I heard voices in here," the nurse broke in. "I'll call the doctor. He will be delighted to hear this." Another glare across the room. "You'd best leave, sir." Once more the man on the bed received her professional inspection. "Do you want anything?"

"No." He moved his head to grin at Cummings. "See you in the morning, no doubt."

"And the afternoon, and the evening, and the next morning after that, forever and ever. Don't forget what I said—I meant it all right!" The supervisor got up from the chair to reveal that a body, after all, was attached to the balancing head. "I'll be here." He crossed over to the door and paused, turning again to look at Nash. "And just in case you're entertaining ideas, forget them. You'll find us in the corridor and all around the building." He made a circling motion with his finger.

Nash listened to his fading footfalls outside.

"Is there a man waiting in the corridor?" he asked the nurse.

"Yes, sir."

"And outdoors too?"

"I think so. I haven't seen them but some of the girls were talking."

Nash nodded. "Nurse—there is something I want."

"Yes?"

"I want information, a newspaper. What's been happening?"

"Well, I'll try to find one." She smiled. "You were in them—with a mysterious blonde. It's always a mysterious blonde, isn't it?" She stood off to examine him. "What did you do to her?"

"Nothing," he declaimed with mild exasperation, "and I'm not interested in mysterious blondes. Was there anything in the papers about a rocket ship—a spaceship?"

"A spaceship? Well—no. Should there be?"

"Are you sure? Nothing at-all?"

"I didn't see anything." The nurse considered him for a moment. "Is it going to the moon or something?"

"I don't think so," Nash replied absently, slowly, his thoughts elsewhere. "I don't know, I can only guess. But I doubt very, very much that it's going to the moon."

She came nearer to the bed and lowered her voice. "That policeman is quite angry with you. He's been storming up and down the corridor for days, just waiting. I hope you haven't done anything wrong."

"That policeman," Nash said, "wants to know the answers to a thousand questions—that's why he's angry with me. And do you know what? If I can't find a way to evade him and his men outside, I'll just have to stay and answer them." He grinned at the girl. "And don't think that won't add to his misery."

XIV

GROUND zero:

The warning signal of red smoke belched from a nearby stack. From one of the underground control bunkers an automatic timer tripped a blaring klaxon each five minutes. There was no movement, no sign of life above ground. Cameras mounted on vertical tracks aimed their lenses at the object; interspersed among them were microphones, already relaying sound back to the tape recorders. The long barrels of the telescopic lenses on television pickups peeped from slots of concrete.

The object resembled a two-step rocket.

The lower half was a rocket, a heavy, squat booster designed only for the purpose of getting the sleek monster above it off the ground. The rocket rested quietly on four fins whose tips stood on concrete bases; its vast bulk was nothing more than a huge fuel tank tapering at the bottom to a rounded, bulging firing chamber and exhaust tubes. It had but one purpose, and was expendable. The rocket's job was to carry its

load a certain height into the air and then fall loose; carry it to a height where any possible atomic reaction would not harm those who waited below. The height reached, the limited fuel exhausted in one mighty leap, the rocket would cast itself free of the object above it and tumble back to earth, spent. Compact radio controls built into it would steer the ungainly bulk skyward, would control the direction of flight by deflection vanes in the firing chamber, would trigger the release mechanism. No more was asked of the rocket.

The final five-minute signal had sounded and its echo lost among the hills; now a human voice issued tinnily from a buried bunker, counting off the remaining minutes. The microphones picked up the whirring, clicking sounds of the cameras as those robot eyes went into motion. A sighing wind fled across the baked desert. The minutes had gone and the voice counted seconds.

Kick-off!

Red-yellow-blue flaming fury scorched into the desert sands and the concrete bases were instantly blackened as the rocket vomited fire. A fiery miniature sandstorm arose at the base of the booster, obscuring sight, and then the whole area blossomed into flame. Steel arms of the propping crane fell away, leaving the object standing alone amidst fire and sand. It staggered and began a slow rise.

One hundred feet:

The unbeautiful, unpainted monster was going up, gaining speed with each thrust of fuel emitted from its belly. Tongues of fire continued to beat down on the ground, licking at the sand and the steel frames which had contained it. The robotic cameras climbed their vertical ladders, peering at it, and the microphones recorded a mushrooming thunder of deafening sound. The rocket wobbled, creating the illusion of hesitation, then zoomed starward as the inner controls asserted command.

One thousand feet:

Climbing steadily, climbing fast; the

bellowing fire no longer reached the ground and the noise of its passage registered a fraction of a second late on the mechanical ears. The air around it and behind it boiled with heat but still the ugly rocket climbed, pushing its load into the sky. The desert beneath was still with a frightened silence.

Ten thousand feet:

Up, always up. The cameras strained at the top of their tracks and could do no more than scan the full sky, seeing the smoky trail left behind, seeing the pale moon lose its daily battle to the brightening dawn. The high, thin smoke trails wavered as they were caught in the moving air currents, wavered and lost all semblance of their original form. The last of the thunderous noises had come, been captured on the recording tapes, and were heard no more. Now a jet-fighter flew in high, wide circles overhead to observe the rocket's ascent, flew madly but was always left behind.

Human eye and glass lens lost sight of the object.

Forty-five miles:

The exhaust tubes went suddenly quiet and dead as the fuel tank emptied. The eruption of fire, smoke and sound ceased as the rocket stopped its mad pounding. Its task was complete; tilting now to the east it continued to climb but its life was gone. Within its shell an electronic impulse reached out to trip a battery of relays and abruptly the dead hulk found itself alone in the sky. The massive soaring bullet seemed to come apart in the middle as the slim upper portion lifted itself from the useless husk, tore free and screamed away, ever climbing into the east.

Abandoned by the child it had carried so far, the dead rocket continued its futile trajectory into space, faltered, and then lazily turned to begin the long hard

fall to earth. It was done, spent.

The slender, needlelike shaft it had carried was already fast vanishing into the rising sun.

Five hundred miles:

The great ship hurled itself through space on invisible wings, driven by mastered atomic power. Its long sleek lines were broken in innumerable places by glass eyes peering out, up, down, all around; the extended tubular nacelle jutting from its nose suggested a radio antenna. The ship barreled a swathe through the colorless vacuum, tilting more and more to the eastward until its line of flight suggested a horizontal rather than a vertical climb. Silently, without flame or back-thrusting thunder it ripped into space.

Swiftly it traveled and still it continued to pile speed upon speed, as though rushing to meet the maximum demanded of it before its own fuel supply gave out and the drive motor failed. The initial thrust alone would keep it moving forever. The vessel plunged majestically through the airless sky.

One thousand-plus miles:

The ship had reached its assigned orbit and was already flattened out on a horizontal trajectory, already beginning its first historic trip around the earth.

It would hang there, continually circling the earth with terrific speed until eternity or until it was intercepted, looking, peering, searching the secretive world below, reporting all that it saw back to those bunkers beneath the New Mexican desert. Hodgkins's ship was an orbital observation station, designed to circle the earth each two hours until the end of time. Some three minutes after blasting away from the desert sands it had reached its destination.

Time had already ended for Carolyn Hodgkins.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

THE HOUSE OF ISZM

A Remarkable Novel by JACK VANCE



Illustration by
PETER POULTON

ESCAPE By JOSEPH SHALLIT

It was a big step Clyde planned to take—

but he didn't expect to put his foot in it

IT WAS the "Million Dollar Tour"—Moon, Venus, Mars, the asteroids, and return. The ship was the new *Acadia*, billed as "the world's most luxurious flying hotel"—"the spaceship that has everything." Everything, no question about it. A swimming pool. A

beauty shop. Overnight dry-cleaning service (simply leave clothing in bag outside your door). Movies nightly in the Starlight Theatre (latest Hollywood films). Dancing in the Crystal Ballroom with music by Stan Masetto's Debonnaires, *MGM* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mars)

recording artists. Shuffleboard. Tours through the ship under the personal supervision of the popular Captain Robert ("Robby") MacClain. Card parties every afternoon. Dancing lessons (samba, mambo or the ever-popular, old-fashioned waltzes). Scintillating social staff—"something doing every minute."

It was a wonderful trip. There was hardly anybody aboard who didn't say so. There was really a fabulous crowd. Some of the best names in New York. Some from Boston and Philly, too. A few of the names weren't particularly familiar, but every passenger had to be passed on by a special committee. They didn't want to take just anybody who had money. They wanted to have a *congenial group*.

And it was very much that—congenial. A swell bunch. The masquerade party they had the night before they landed on Mars was an example. It was really a riot. Mrs. C. Stewart Carothers came as a Floradora girl with a dazzling ostrich-plume hat, and before the night was over she was swimming in the pool, ostrich plumes and all. There was the madcap Mrs. Connie Masterson, who came in a daring harem costume, and Patricia (Pat) Morville, who came as Madame Pompadour, and the irrepressible Anthony (Tony) Baxter, who came as Henry the Eighth and pretended to mistake every woman in the place for Anne Boleyn. Talk about fun. It seemed as if the champagne never *would* stop. The corks popped like castanets. The next day, everybody was so bushed that only a baker's dozen of hardy souls got out of bed to take the guided tour "over the red hills and vales of Mars." However, when they got back, they reported that it was too hard to make good pictures, and the red filters hadn't been adjusted to the Martian actinic values. And the natives were very unfriendly—just wouldn't come off their canal-boats—so those who had spent the day resting up didn't really miss anything, anyway.

The stopover on Venus was longer—four full days. Of course, the fog was a little reminiscent of London, but that's

where the similarity ended. The passengers debarked at Vulcania, the Venusian capital, and moved into the luxurious new Ritz-Venus. It was here that the semi-finals in the duplicate bridge and canasta tournaments were held, and naturally it was hard to stir up too much enthusiasm for the daily trips "along the famous Venusian hanging gardens and through quaint native villages." Most of the passengers did make one of the trips, because after coming way out here it seemed like a sin not to get out and see what the place was like; but one encounter with the soggy soil and the miserable mud-hut villages was enough to discourage anybody. It was really a relief to get back to the Ritz-Venus by cocktail time.

AT NIGHT, after the scheduled card games were over, everybody went out to La Vie En Venus. This was truly a fabulous place, as the brochure stated. The proprietor had "transported to this remote planet all the best features of a fine New York night club, a small-town carnival and a circus." You could watch a chorus line of can-can cuties or the internationally famous ballroom dancers, Marco and DeLane, or that hilarious female impersonator, Jerry Kendall; or, if you were in a less sophisticated mood, you could feed Dumbo, the elephant, skate on artificial ice, throw hoops at kewpie-doll prizes, dine at a neon-lighted stand featuring "De-luscious Hamburgers," shoot at metal ducks or play scramble. And then there was the grand finale, which featured native Venusians dressed as Indian braves, dancing the exciting tomahawk dance.

The whole thing was really a tremendous experience.

"Isn't it?" Myra Crandall said.

"Isn't it what?" said her husband, Clyde. He was standing at the window of their room at the Ritz, watching the flicker of neon from the Midway.

"I said isn't it really a tremendous experience?"

"Uh-huh. It sure is."

"And to think how I practically had

to beat you on the head to persuade you to go," Myra said. "Tell me the truth—aren't you *glad* I did?"

"Yeah—sure I am," Clyde said.

"Well—that's a relief. The way you've been moping around, I didn't think you were even enjoying yourself."

"I've been enjoying myself," Clyde said.

Myra got up from the vanity table and began digging herself out of her foundation, the rigid, bony mechanism that had never ceased to appall him. She paused halfway out. "Well, are you coming to bed, or are you going to stay at that window all night?"

He came over slowly and sat down on the edge of the bed. He didn't look at her. "I'm getting up early tomorrow and . . . take a look around," he said.

"What?" The rest of Myra—all the little bulges and hummocks with their pink, self-indulged look—came billowing out of the foundation. "You mean you're not going to watch me play in the duplicate tournament?"

"I watched you most of today," Clyde said doggedly.

"But tomorrow is the last elimination play! *Clyde!*"

He bent over to unlace his shoes.

"Goodness," Myra said, "I should think my own husband would be interested enough to want to . . . what is it you want to see, do you mind telling me? You've already taken two trips to those native villages. Good lord! What is it you expect to see?"

"Nothing particular—I just thought I'd nose around."

Myra's lips crumpled in a kind of tolerant, amused reproof. "You know what all the crowd would *think* if you weren't around? They'd say Mr. Crandall must be out chasing after some of these native girls."

A laugh worked its way uncomfortably up through his throat, and he worked hard on his laces.

"So you'll be a dear, won't you, dear, and stay around tomorrow?" Myra said, coming over to him. "I'd feel so lonesome out in that big room without my

darling husband." Her plump forearms draped on his shoulders. She plopped a wet kiss on his forehead. Then she let go and turned away. "No bath salts—what do you think of that?" she said. "Not an ounce in this whole enormous hotel! I'm certainly going to write to the Ritz people when we get back."

Clyde crawled out of bed a little after dawn. Myra lay there on her back, the way she always slept, breathing with a deep, resentful quaver. He got dressed quickly and slipped out of the room, carrying his shoes in his hand and feeling very foolish about the whole thing.

The elevator boy and the desk clerk gave him politely inquisitive salutations. He walked out into the pale blue light. The air was startlingly cold. Morning mists rolled out of nowhere. He pulled the lapels of his topcoat close, but he couldn't stop shivering. When he'd gone out the day before, it had been during the warm afternoon. He hadn't realized it got so cold here.

He walked past the deserted Midway. There were a couple of flickering neon signs that somebody had forgotten to shut off. One was the "Girls-Girls-Girls" sign, and the other, "De-luscious Hamburgers." The De-luscious got him down. He hurried on, shivering. Two middle-aged Martian men, dressed in their simple fringed brown robes, came toward him carrying water poles. He saw them glance at the Midway signs, and then their eyes swept coldly across him. He felt like saying, "Look, it isn't my fault—" but it was a futile notion. The water poles swung past him aloofly, and he kept slogging up the road.

The native village lay along the edge of a steep-sided gorge. As Clyde approached it, he slowed his steps uncertainly. Would she remember him? He had talked to her for no more than five minutes, as the crowd of sightseers surged through the village. She had posed shyly for his camera. She had sold him a *mimlac*, the yellow, doughy cake that was the only Venusian food popu-

lar with visitors from Earth. She had told him that she had four brothers and a sister, and that she was attending the English-language school set up by the Ritz people for prospective hotel employees. Finally, after much urging she had told him her name. Larcranda, it had sounded like to him.

That had been all. The guide had blown his whistle and herded the sightseers back into the big copter, and they had taken off for a trip along the spongy bogs which the guide insisted on calling "lagoons."

All last night, in the Ritz ballroom and at the Midway, Clyde had kept taking surreptitious glances at the photo in his wallet. He couldn't stop. He couldn't stop, even though the fascination annoyed him. He was Clyde Crandall, of Sutton Place and Larchmont, a cotton broker, forty-six years old, member of the Princeton Club, the Racquet Club, the Union League. It was ridiculous for him to have a schoolboy crush on a Venusian female he had seen for five minutes. She probably wouldn't even remember having talked to him. She would probably get her four brothers to shoo him away. And it would serve him right.

He was at the outskirts of the village now. The greenish, dome-shaped huts lay in an irregular pattern on both sides of the road. Beyond them were the boggy fields with their thick, velvety growth of *mrila* grain. Women pounding *mrila* in front of the houses, men twisting rope, old people smoking in the doorways, all turned to eye him as he came. Their glances were gentle, but there was no warmth, no welcome in them. And of course he understood why. He was one of the Earthlings, the uninvited, the intruders, who had come into their peaceful land with noise and neon, with cameras and condescension. . . .

Clyde's heart pounded as he saw her in front of her hut. Larcranda was sitting on the threshold with an earthenware griddle in front of her, patting yellow *mrila* dough into the shape of *mimlac* cakes. She looked up at his footsteps,

her amber eyes round and curious. And then she smiled, and Clyde felt as if his heart had been taken up in two small pink hands, and was being turned around and patted into a *mimlac* cake.

IT WAS fantastic how he could sit down so familiarly on the ground in front of Larcranda, sit there without a word, and answer smile for smile as she uninterruptedly turned and patted and turned the cakes in her hands. It felt like something that had happened before—or something out of an old dream. He was convinced he could step inside the hut blindfolded and know everything that was there and where it was, and it was a very silly thought, and he knew it. Nevertheless, he sat there as if he had done this a thousand times, and looked at her big amber eyes and her slim, sun-washed cheeks and the bud-shaped lips with the uplifted shadows in the corners.

After a while, they were talking, and he wasn't aware how the conversation had started. Larcranda was telling how she had awakened just before light and gone to the spring and bathed herself, and then had filled her water pole and brought it back. Then she had gone into the field to feed the *criskol* and its newly-hatched nestlings, and the *criskol* had sung her a delightful song that had made her breath stop. Then she had come back and gone to work making *mimlac* out of the *mrila* flour her brother had pounded for her the night before, and then she had seen the visitor coming, and the sight of him had so delighted her that it almost made her breath stop.

"It made my breath stop, too," he said, which was a very naive thing for Clyde Crandall, age forty-six, of Sutton Place and Larchmont, to be saying, and it was hard for him to believe he was saying it.

Larcranda went on talking, and he watched her, finding something lovely and wonderful in every change of expression, every twist of her shoulder and movement of her sandaled feet. She was wearing the usual Martian tight-

wrapped brown robe, and her slim body spoke in soft, fluid accents through the thin cloth. And brought the thought of Myra to him. Myra, with her hard-ribbed foundation and her heavily lacquered nails and her tinted hair and her heavy link bracelets, was a ponderous machine, a dreadnaught, an iron effigy, beside this soft, fluid creature. Nevertheless, it would be Myra and not this creature he would be with tomorrow, when the *Acadia* darted into the sky.

After about an hour, Larcanda's parents, her brothers and her sister came in from the fields. Clyde went inside the hut with them, and looked avidly at the simple couches and the round, curtained windows and the wall hangings with their woven scenes of village life, and they were all immediately familiar to him, and he wondered whether that was because they so naturally fitted this interior or because he actually had had some prevision of them.

He sat down with Larcanda and her family on the floor mat, around the circle of steaming earthenware pots, and the food was passed around. Clyde ate with more appetite than he could remember in years. There were two delicious types of fowl, fresh fish from the lagoons, sweet red roots, three kinds of *mimlac* cakes and superb wild fruits. It was funny how everybody thought of the Venusians as poor. These were eating like the richest Earthlings. And earning their food with far less labor and strain.

WHEN the meal ended, they all went out on the shaded terrace in the rear of the hut. The two old folks smoked their reedy pipes, and Norg, who was evidently the cleverest of the brothers, picked out a tune on a ten-stringed, guitar-like instrument, and Larcanda and her elder sister danced a strange, solemn, bowing, bending dance, like little girls curtseying endlessly at a dancing school. For a brief, quivering moment, watching them, Clyde hungered again for the child he had always wanted, but which Myra had warded off with careful chemistry. Then, suddenly his hosts were calling on

him. It was his turn to display the dances of *his* country! Clyde found himself propelled to his feet—found himself shamefacedly going through the motions of a foxtrot. But their delighted cries eased his embarrassment, and in a little while he found himself incredibly pleased to be here performing for them, to be enclosed in this warm circle of suntanned faces and glowing amber eyes.

Now it was time for their midday sleep, and he sensed they expected him to leave. He stood reluctantly in the doorway with them. Here was life lived with laughter, life lived without strain—good lord, he thought, when had he spent half a day without tension, when in the last twenty years? They gathered around him to touch his hand in parting, and, through Larcanda, they told him how kind he had been to give them the richness of his company, and how happy he must be now to return to his friends. As he headed up the road, he had the bizarre feeling he was leaving home, leaving the only friends he had, and going off to a world of strangers.

When Clyde saw the neon lights of the Midway again, the fury choked him. Damn it, how could they have done it? What kind of barbarians did he live with down there on Earth? Couldn't they see what they had done to this clean, simple, harmonious, sunwashed landscape?

Myra was sitting in the lounge with two of her friends, both as enameled and lacquered and tinted as she was. "Well!" she exclaimed. "Where have *you* been?" And she quickly changed her look of irritation to one of amused tolerance as she glanced around at her friends for support and approbation.

"Out chasing native girls," Clyde said, and walked across the lobby toward the elevators.

That was an awful joke to make in front of those women, Myra told him that night. It was simply atrocious, ghoulish and in bad taste. What on earth had gotten into him? Had he been drinking, or what? And incidentally, what time had he left in the morning? She had awakened at ten and he was gone.

Sneaking out like a thief! What on earth was he up to, anyway?

He parried her questions with an adroitness and boldness that surprised him, and Myra finally gave up in exasperation, and plumped herself into bed and went to sleep. The reason he didn't answer her directly was that he wasn't sure about it. But by dawn, after lying awake all night, he had made up his mind. He was only forty-six; he had a large chunk of his life left. There was no reason why he had to spend it in the same unsatisfactory way he had been doing all these years.

He got out of bed and sat down at the table with a sheet of hotel stationery. He started writing a straightforward account of what he intended to do, but then he realized it would lead to complications. Myra would hold up the ship, go hunting for him, decide he was out of his mind, try to have him brought back by force.

Clyde ripped up the sheet and threw the pieces out the window, and started again. He made up a story about an incurable disease—he'd known about it for a year, he wrote, but he'd kept it a secret. He had come on this trip to have a last fling before committing suicide. Now he was ready. There was a small spaceship taking off early that morning for Mars. He was going to stow away on it, get into an airlock and leap off into space when they were a million miles or so away from Venus. The cold and vacuum would kill him instantly. It wasn't a bad way to die. She wasn't to grieve. His lawyers had the will—everything was taken care of—she was well provided for . . .

Clyde had the hotel copter drive him to the spaceport. He let the driver see him go inside. Then quickly he went out the rear door and headed out the tree-shrouded, rutted road to the village.

Larcraanda gave a slim cry of ecstasy when he told her he wanted to stay

and make her his mate. She ran into the field, her hair streaming, and gathered her brothers and they all came running back and embraced him. Then, quickly, they took Clyde across the field to a hollow under a bank and hid him. Norg, who worked part-time at the Midway, was sent there to find out if Clyde's deception had worked. Norg came back happily with the word that the *Acadia* was being readied for an early takeoff in an attempt to intercept the other ship.

While Larcraanda and her parents worked in the hut, preparing the marriage feast, Clyde and the brothers hid in the *mrila* field until, abruptly, the *Acadia* leaped away into the sky with a roar of orange exhaust. Then Larcraanda's brothers threw their arms around Clyde's shoulders. He was home, among his own! They formed a phalanx around him and led him down the road to celebrate. Norg, he learned, had opened a little shop to sell *mimlac* cakes and *rirus*, the fermented drink made of *mrila* grain. The shop was around a curve of the road, inside a wooded grove . . .

The sign rocked his eyes. *De-luscious Mimlac*. In neon.

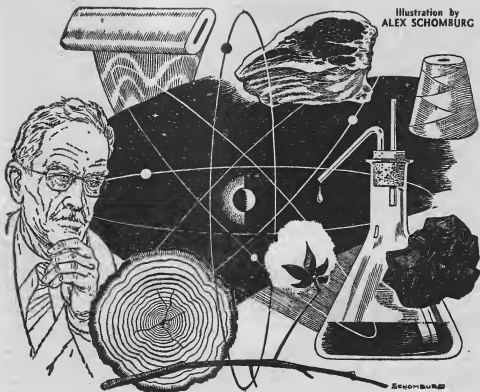
Norg smiled proudly. "Boss in Midway buy sign and electric generator for me from your planet. Now everybody want sign. Soon we have plenty sign."

Inside, the *rirus* flowed—the brothers poured it into Clyde and into themselves. You had to learn how to drink if you wanted to be happy on Venus, they said. It was the only way you could relax from the tension of trying to raise *mrila* grain against the onslaughts of drought, birds, insects, blight.

They led him fuzzily back to their road, then went out to the field and let Clyde meet Larcraanda at the hut alone. Her eyes narrowed when she saw him, her mouth twisted, hardened petulantly. "Where have you been?" she said shrilly. "Answer me! *Where have you been?*"

Read THE DARK WORLD by HENRY KUTTNER, featured in December
FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE—25c at all stands!

Illustration by
ALEX SCHOMBURG



The **BIG** Operators

By **CURT STORM**

Are scientists pulling a
SWITCHEROO
on old

$$E = M c^2$$

?

GENTLEMEN, I give you the high-potential boys. These fellows work with the smallest objects and the biggest energies science has yet produced. Mention what seems to you or me like a large number—say, 100,000,000—and they'll smile at your childish fancy.

Right now, at the Brookhaven Lab on Long Island, they're getting ready to build a gadget which will enable them to play with energies of 100,000,000,000 volts.

Yes, that's a hundred *billion* volts. Or, as the scientists put it, 10^{11} volts. With satiric glee they're planning on kicking

STARTLING STORIES

up to this potential a batch of defenseless little particles, each somewhere around $1/30,000,000,000$ th of an inch in diameter. The particles are protons, actually pretty large as atomic tidbits go, but still not big enough to fight back.

Why shove protons around this way? There's a very good reason—and one that's important to our future.

The nuclear researchers are trying to create matter. Or, more exactly, to convert energy into stable matter, using as their raw material the tremendous energies built up by accelerating atomic particles like protons (and the smaller electrons) until these "atomic bullets" are traveling at close to the speed of light.

They hope to *reverse* the process by which the A-bomb works—instead of turning matter into kinetic energy with a loud bang, they want to force enough energy into a small space to make it convert to matter. According to theory, there's no reason why they can't, since the famous $E = Mc^2$ might as well be

E

stated $M = \frac{E}{c^2}$. We know, for instance,

that the mass of a simple hydrogen nucleus—a single proton—represents just under a billion volts of energy.

Unfortunately, this doesn't mean that a mere billion volts will produce a proton. It's a little more complex than that. Several months ago the Brookhaven Cosmotron, the most powerful particle accelerator built to date, reached an energy level of about 2.3 billion volts, and no protons were created (although it's theoretically possible at that point).

The catch is that it doesn't seem to be possible to produce just a proton and nothing else. This difficulty stems from the nature of electricity, that is, the fact that for every positive charge which exists, there must be somewhere in the universe a counterbalancing negative charge. Since a proton is positively charged, we cannot produce one unless at the same time we produce a similar particle which is negative.

So far, a negative particle with the same mass as a proton has not been found

in nature, although the possibility of its existence was suggested 'way back in 1931 and it was named the "antiproton." If we ever *do* find it, we'll have something too hot handle, for antiprotons would be the basis of science-fiction's contraterrene matter, composed of unstable "inverted" atoms. Such fabulous stuff would be charged exactly opposite to all known earthly materials—a negative nucleus of antiprotons and antineutrons surrounded by satellite positive electrons, or "positrons."

WHEN we call atoms of this type "unstable," what we really mean, of course, is that they are unstable here on our planet where the negative nuclei would be instantly and fatally attracted to the nearest "normal" nuclei of our atoms. The result would probably make the H-bomb look like a soggy firecracker. There's no particular reason, however, why a whole galaxy couldn't be made up of CT matter. Maybe right now, on some anti-Earth, the physicists are experimenting with strange protons that are positively charged!

So the Brookhaven scientists, instead of simply producing a proton, must produce a proton-antiproton pair. The energy required to do this is double the mass-energy represented by the proton alone—just under 2 billion volts for the pair. The matched pair would then divide equally the energy which goes into their creation and their opposite charges would satisfy the universal requirement of electrical balance.

But if the Cosmotron has already developed 2.3 billion volts, how come no pairs have been produced? In fact, how do we know the energy will convert to mass, anyway? Frankly, we don't *know*, but the more we learn, the more intimate seems the relationship between mass and energy. Also, we have a good precedent—we have already created electron-positron pairs by using smaller jolts of energy.

These smaller particles (each about $1/1800$ th the mass of a proton) are quite often produced when approximately a

million volts shoots close to the nucleus of an atom. The energy disappears, and in its place we find the electron-positron combination. Notice, however, that these pairs are *quite often* formed, but by no means always. We don't yet know the exact conditions required, but we can get results quite regularly under the same general conditions. It's logical to surmise, then, that enough additional energy thrown at the right place will produce proton-antiproton pairs.

Possibly we're on the wrong track entirely. Maybe the electron and positron are somehow bound in the atomic nucleus and a million volts jolts them loose. Even though electrons are found in the nucleus (in neutrons), this doesn't explain where the positron could come from and the whole occurrence seems unlikely.

On the other hand, by the time you read this perhaps the Brookhaven experimenters will have made enough tries to have succeeded in swapping their 2 billion volts for a proton and an antiproton.

The Cosmotron is expected to develop peak energies of around 3 billion volts, eventually, and to give a small yield of proton-antiproton pairs. To obtain the pairs in quantity demands higher energies, but those levels were previously impractical to reach because they are a function of size in the present Cosmotron.

The way this machine is constructed has been described often enough not to need repeating here. You'll recall that it's essentially a ring-shaped magnet, better than 60 feet in diameter and containing 2,200 tons of iron. An evacuated chamber runs around the core of the iron ring. Into this a batch of protons is squirted, to begin traveling in a circular path controlled by the magnet. Each time around, the protons are kicked along a little faster by a radio frequency generator until—one second and three million revolutions later—they've built up to about 2 billion volts of energy.

This is fine, but when the high-potential boys decide they want *lots* of proton pairs, it begins to get complicated—and expensive.

SUPPOSE they need 60 billion volts. That's 20 times the present machine's top limit, so if they build to the same design the magnet ring must be about 1,200 feet in diameter. The height and thickness must be correspondingly larger. Not impossible—until you calculate the amount of iron in a magnet that size, a staggering 17,600,000 tons! Seems like Long Island might slide gracefully into the Atlantic beneath that load!

Fortunately, while the researchers were still at the stage of thinking wistfully how nice it might be to have one of those, three of their number came up with a beautifully improved design. This will not only give the boys the 100 billion volts mentioned earlier, but the construction will use less iron than even the present Cosmotron, though the actual installation will cost more. (Don't ask *me* why they don't think of these things in the first place, I'm just a bad-tempered writer!)

The new accelerator, unofficially called a "strong-focusing synchrotron," operates on the same basic principle of making protons run around in circles at ever-increasing speed. The improvement lies in the method of using magnetic fields to "focus" the proton beam and make it stay on the proper path inside the vacuum chamber.

The flying protons would like nothing better than to take off in a radial spiral, due to centrifugal force. Another force tends to make them move upward or downward. The present Cosmotron uses a single magnetic field, which keeps the protons pretty well in line up to around 3 billion volts. Above that, however, if the magnetic field is overcoming the radial force, the vertical movement gets out of hand, and vice versa.

The new synchrotron design *uses* two magnetic fields. For a very brief fraction of a second one field comes on, focuses the proton beam in the radial direction, then switches off. Immediately, the second field goes into action to focus the beam vertically, after which it is followed by the first field again. This continues in rapid succession, holding the beam

where it belongs. With the beam firmly under control, the energy limit goes up.

This will make the nuclear scientists happy, of course, but what we want to know is how it will eventually affect Joe, the average man, and his wife, Mabel.

Well, let's see. Have you bought a new plastic shoehorn, a package of eye-glass wipes or a set of nylon undies?

All three items contain man-made, synthetic substances and all three are made from products of the United States chemical industry, which in 1951 had net sales of about eighteen billion dollars. A sales figure of that size isn't normally attained by an infant industry—compare it with electronics which, despite radio, TV, industrial and military uses, has only about a 4.5 billion dollar annual business.

Yet, in spite of its size and age (about a century), the chemical industry doesn't *know* very much about chemistry. Our vaunted synthetics—plastics, man-made fibers and miracle drugs—were either stumbled upon by accident or created only after months or years of drudging trial-and-error which amounts almost to the same thing.

Somebody at the back of the class is waving a hand frantically. If we're so ignorant, why does it take four to six years of college to learn chemistry? Because the student is learning the *whats* and the *hows*, literally thousands of observed facts which we've put together into a structure of sorts, but on a foundation that is still full of holes. Most of the basic *whys* are still tightly locked inside the atom. It is this kind of important knowledge that the nuclear scientists are trying to get at, aided in part by their Cosmotron and the projected synchrotron.

Why do chemicals react with each other? *Why* do certain substances (catalysts) sometimes have to be present to make other substances combine? *Why* do different atoms form molecular combinations at different rates? *Why* does radiation energy aid some chemical reactions and hinder others? *Why* do drugs affect physiological activity?

IF THE big operators can convert energy to the basic particles of matter and learn the answers to some of those questions, Dodger fan Joe and his Mabel will promptly benefit. The short-range results, in just the next few years, will undoubtedly include a host of new synthetics to replace natural substances like wood, leather, cotton and even some metals. These synthetics will be cheaper and far better adapted to their particular uses than our relatively crude plastics and fibers of today.

The long view ahead is fascinating, even the short glimpse which is all we have space for in this article. Assuming that most of the basic "whys" have been answered 75 years from now, the chemical industry will be *the* industry, producing everything we use, including most or all of our food. Farmers will grow crops rich in raw chemicals and send their produce to the factory, rather than the market-place, while the butchers' steaks will come not from the stockyards but from the protein manufacturer. Synthesizing most products from abundant air, soil, sea water, coal and replaceable plant crops, chemists will create needed new substances of almost any chemical-physical properties by simply plotting the molecular structure, then building it.

Serious diseases of today will be tamed or vanquished, but periodic epidemics of new diseases are likely to occur, sweeping continents or the world as viruses and bacteria mutate desperately to gain immunity to our drugs. Each epidemic will be licked more quickly than the last, until eventually we learn to create by forced mutation strains of germs with which man can live in harmony.

This is a brief picture, but add to it the electronics industry of the future, which will be doing most of our work and our non-creative thinking for us. Electronics, also, will benefit enormously from a better knowledge of atomic forces. Joe and Mabel can spend almost every day at the ball park!

Hats off, gentlemen, and silence, please. The high-potential boys, the big operators, are thinking.



Illustration by PAUL ORBAN

THE UNPREY SPRAY

It looked like the answer to all their troubles, but it only raised a question

By JOSEPH SLOTKIN

IF NATURE abhorred a vacuum, it might have been said of Dr. Alan Crown that he abhorred violence even more. That was the major reason he'd been losing sleep over what, ironically enough, Consolidated Chemicals affectionately referred to as its "sleep gas."

Formula 97, as it was known in the lab, had top research priority at Con Chem during World War IV, and Dr. Crown had been improving on the mixture already in use—making it even

more invisible, less odiferous, quicker and longer-lasting.

For every extra day lost, thousands of soldiers and countless civilians were killed by atomic warheads and super explosives. Each day lost in experimentation, Dr. Crown counted in lost lives, not lost sleep.

It was on one of his sleepless nights, in the soundless lab, that it happened. Dr. Crown was calmly stirring the hundredth batch of fuming chemicals when

the guinea pig's cage door fell open.

He had been testing his gas on the laboratory animals in the cages ranged along one shining white wall. Perhaps he had not fastened the cage door securely enough. He was pretty tired, and getting a bit desperate. The small spray gun he was charging with his latest mixture felt heavy in his hand.

He didn't hear the little, restless cavy gnawing at the cage door latch. But out of the corner of his eye, he saw a sudden movement, and heard a scurrying sound as the little animal ran out and along the floor—straight into the claws of the lab cat, Oscar.

For a moment, it was a frozen tableau: Dr. Crown, holding the spray gun; the little rodent, squalling in fright, and Oscar, twitching tail and whiskers, his yellow eyes great round saucers of surprise at the unexpected windfall.

At the same instant when Oscar raised one muscled, razor-edged paw, Dr. Crown raised the spray gun and pushed the plunger home, fervently hoping the new gas would only put Oscar to sleep for a while.

As the almost invisible, odorless spray swept out into the room and enveloped the two animals, Dr. Crown was aware of a strange tickling at the base of his skull. He tried not to breathe but feared he had already gotten a whiff of the mixture.

Expecting at any moment to fall unconscious on his gleaming laboratory tiles, Dr. Crown held on, watching avidly for any reactions in the animals he had sprayed. He saw Oscar seem to hesitate, the little beast still caught between those fatal paws.

Then, with a peculiar mewing sound, Oscar released his claws, and the guinea pig scampered out the door.

Oscar sneezed once, then looked up sheepishly at Dr. Crown, as though he were apologizing for having failed in his duties as chief mouser and general protector of the lab's facilities.

The tomcat peered over his whiskers at his paws, extended, then retracted his sharp claws, curled his tail, twitched it

twice, then walked, stiff-legged with dignity, across the tiles to Dr. Crown, and rubbed his head against the chemist's trousers.

Amused, Dr. Crown scratched behind Oscar's ears. Then thoughtfully, he measured out a small portion of the new mixture, and began to analyze it.

When he had finished, he knew what he had, but didn't know what to do with it.

It was during the following weekend that he decided what could be done with it.

And when he told newsmen, later, of the incident in his own back yard, one of them quickly dubbed the new formula "The Unprey Spray."

He was gardening, pulling weeds, tossing them into his wheelbarrow, kneeling close to the ground, near his Eugenia hedge, when he heard a buzzing. He glanced up, and saw a golden-headed fly caught in a spider web, trying to evade the clutching grip of the hungry arachnid.

WITH a sinking feeling, dizzy with empathy, Dr. Crown knelt there, watching the tragedy in miniature. Afterward, he wondered why he hadn't freed the fly at once. But he disliked flies, and would slap one down as quickly as the next fellow when he got the chance. Yet, watching one of them being trapped like this was something else again.

Of course, he disliked spiders on principle. He had always been afraid of them, ever since childhood. Even the Daddy Longlegs, with their habit of waiting, entangling their prey, then stinging them into a state of suspended animation to keep until they wanted them for food—impressed him as the utmost in cruelty, callousness, viciousness.

He knew that in a moment he would free the fly. But meanwhile, he watched, feeling his scalp crawl with horror, feeling with the fly, the snapping, clutching pairs of legs weaving out of the cephalothorax; buzzing but unable to escape the sticky, strong web. He felt the bulg-

ing body come closer, the legs wrap themselves around him.

He could stand it no longer. Stumbling to his feet, he ran to the garage and picked up his lindane spray gun. He would go back and kill them both, thus freeing his conscience, and ridding his mind of the horrible image.

He ran back, guided by the buzzing. He aimed the spray gun, and pulled back on the lever.

But he was unable to plunge the lever home. He tried, but, knowing it would mean death for both these creatures, he was unable to do it.

A brilliant man, Dr. Crown felt his axons, dendrites, synapses whirling like a Mark IV. He had gotten a whiff of the new gas; he had seen Oscar release his natural prey—

The gas! That must be it.

Oscar couldn't kill. Now he too could not kill!

On sudden impulse, he ran to the house, emptied a box of matches, picked up an empty pill bottle, and ran back to the buzzing hedge. With his trowel, he maneuvered the hungry spider into the pill bottle, clamped the cover down, peered through the air hole he had made. The fly he put into the match box, hearing it buzz bewilderedly, reprieved.

In the laboratory on Monday morn-

ing he sprayed them both with the new gas. Then, holding his breath, he unclamped the cover that imprisoned the spider, and let it crawl into the large test tube where the fly buzzed aimlessly, frantically.

He watched.

He watched the sprayed spider crawl over to the sprayed fly, extend a set of its legs in a flickering motion. Then the spider shuddered, or so it seemed, turned, and crawled to the other end of the test tube.

While the fly buzzed frantically, not knowing it had been permanently reprieved.

Unable to kill consciously, Dr. Crown released the insects. Then released the news of his new gas to his superiors. Who released it to the military.

Who released it upon the enemy.

Who captured a small sample of it, analyzed it.

And released a whole batch of it back upon *their* enemies.

A week later, there was an armistice.

A month later, a peace treaty was signed.

The Earth had been soaked in Dr. Crown's gas. Humanity became vegetarians.

Until there were no more vegetables left to eat.



Read THE TRANSPOSED MAN by DWIGHT V. SWAIN

in the current issue of

THRILLING WONDER STORIES

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Illustration by PETER POULTON
89

Lancelot Pell was a dreamer, with his feet firmly planted in trouble and . . .

HIS HEAD

in the CLOUDS

THE Twenty-fifth Century saw many new businesses crowding into industry-jammed Nuyork. The construction of office buildings couldn't keep pace with the boom and many of the smaller outfits took over apartment houses and private dwellings, as citizens moved out to suburbs that were within coptor-commuting distance. Some of the new businesses were natural by-products of space travel. Others, like Clouds, Inc., were the offspring of new advances in science.

Clouds, Inc. ("Our Clouds Have Silver Linings") had taken over what had once been a small apartment building in the upper Eighties on the West Side. It was a new business ("Clouds For Every Occasion") which had sprung into the big money almost overnight. Only five years earlier Clouds, Inc. had occupied one floor in the building; now it needed all seven floors and monthly billings ran into eight figures. A. J. Mortimer, president and owner of Clouds, Inc., liked to brag that he had single-handedly started the business with no equipment except a dozen big glass jugs, a second-hand air-lock pump, and five gallons of alcohol.

His first cloud had come as a complete surprise to Mortimer, but the commercial possibilities of his discovery were not lost upon him.

Now, only ten years later, Clouds, Inc. did an annual decoration business that ran into several million credits. In addition, they had a number of commercial rain accounts, thunder and lightning contracts with several visicast companies, and one very profitable rainbow contract with the Fraternal Order of Treasure Hunters. And A. J. Mortimer was expecting bigger and better things of his company.

Lanny Pell (named Lancelot by a father who was so old-fashioned he still read books) was late reporting to work that day. He had stopped off at the sales room of the Comet Space Lines and waited for the announcement of the contest winners. For two months, one of the latest space cruisers had been displayed in the big window with a sign announcing that one million credits would be paid to the person who came the nearest to guessing correctly the number of beans the ship would hold.

Lanny had spent six weeks struggling with high calculus before he mailed in his guess of 6,000,000 ¹⁰⁰⁰ beans.

He'd spent the next two weeks dreaming of how he'd spend the million credits. He'd rehearsed his resignation to A. J. Mortimer until he knew it by heart. He'd gone over countless travel folders describing the more romantic spots

By KENDELL FOSTER CROSSEN

of the galaxy until he saw them like spots before his eyes. He'd even dreamed about the beautiful girl he'd meet on his travels, but the trip itself had been the most important thing. Lanny had never been off Terra and he thought of little except visiting the far off planets.

He had been so sure of winning that he'd gone directly to the Comet building after breakfast. Then the winner had been announced. It was some visiting Vegan and Lanny didn't even get one of the two million consolation prizes of a round-trip ticket to Mars.

IT WAS almost noon when Lanny finally showed up for work at Clouds, Inc. His flagging spirits had been somewhat revived by a facsimile throwaway thrust into his hand by the corner dispenser, so he said a cheerful good morning to Solina Grayba, the dried-up old maid from Kochab, who was the receptionist.

"Hmph!" was Miss Grayba's only response. She was inclined to share most of A. J. Mortimer's opinions and consequently considered Lanny an irresponsible young man whose fingers were all thumbs. She especially disapproved of anyone who came late to work.

Lanny Pell went on into the Operators Lounge Room, which was deserted, all the other operators being out on assignments. He sprawled in his own chair and turned his attention to the facsimile throwaway. It was the headline that had first caught his eye:

TWO MILLION CREDITS REWARD

Two million credits! That was twice the amount of the Comet prize—which he should have won. That was the magic sum which had revived him from the depression into which he'd been thrown by losing the contest. Now, he eagerly began reading the rest of the message.

The Terran Presidium will pay a reward of two million credits for information leading to the capture of Bzula Dree, an Alpheccan believed to be some-

where on Terra. According to a tip received by the Terran Bureau of Investigation, the Alpheccan is wearing a human body case which enables him to pass as one of us. It is believed that he has been sent here to steal military and other scientific secrets. Special attention should be paid any strangers attending scientific meetings or important social functions, where he may go in hope of making contacts. The Secretary of Galactic Conditions has pointed out that since Alphecca has neither thunder nor lightning storms, he may be sensitive to such phenomena and so can be spotted during a storm. All citizens are requested to report the slightest action of any individual which seems out of the norm. Remember—the man standing next to you right now may be this Alpheccan spy. He is dangerous. Take no chances. Call your nearest Security Patrol.

Lanny Pell leaned back and thought about two million credits. It made for beautiful thinking. He could almost feel the money in his pocket. All he had to do was go around creating small thunder storms and watching for peculiar reactions. Of course, that meant he'd use up a lot of thunder-charges, but he was sure Mr. Mortimer would understand.

"Pell," a voice roared out of the loud speaker in the Lounge Room, "get in here."

"Yes, sir," Lanny Pell said automatically though he knew that his answer couldn't be heard. He tucked the throwaway into his pocket and headed for the office. The first thing he'd do when he collected the two million credits would be to tell Mr. Mortimer off. Mr. Mortimer, he'd say, you can take your cloud-making job and—

HE REACHED the private office where the door-scanner recognized him and permitted him to enter. Filled with thoughts of what he'd say to Mr. Mortimer, he stumbled over a chair, careened through the air with flailing arms, and crashed into the desk. He came to a stop with his face a bare two inches from that of the president and owner of Clouds, Inc.

"Well?" demanded A. J. Mortimer. "Near sighted, Pell? Or did you want to whisper some intimate little thing in my

shell-like ear?"

"I—no, sir." Lanny Pell straightened up and tugged at his one-piece nylene suit. It was always a little tight on him, but it felt as if it might strangle him whenever he was in the presence of his boss.

"Pell," A. J. Mortimer said coldly, "how much do I pay you?"

"Two million credits," Lanny said absent-mindedly.

"What?"

Lanny flushed as he realized what he'd

maybe afraid of thunder and lightning. Now, if I was to just wander around, whipping up a small thunder storm every few minutes, and keep my eyes open—"

"What are you talking about?" Mr. Mortimer demanded.

Lanny fished in his pocket and brought out the circular. A. J. Mortimer grabbed it from his hand and read it. There wasn't a barometer in the office, but if there had been it would have been falling.

When he'd finished, Mr. Mortimer

~~~~~ There's Always Hope ~~~~~

THINK you've got troubles? Feel like a square peg in a round hole? Misunderstood by everyone? Cheer up. After you read about the troubles of Lanny Pell you'll feel positively lucky.

Here was a lad who could do *nothing* right. And if he lived to grow up, there's more than hope for you. Aside from the philosophy, there are laughs galore in this newest Crossen opus, so shuck your cares and wade in, the rain is wonderful.

—The Editor

said. "I mean seventy-five credits a week, sir."

"Whatever it is, it's too much. You come in at noon, you fall over the furniture, and you bungle half the jobs I give you. What happened this week? You gave Marpix Visinews snow when they wanted thunder and when Solar Visipix wanted a rainbow for the end of their latest epic, what did you do? You gave them a cloudburst that washed away two cameramen and fifty extras. Pell, you're an idiot."

"Yes, sir." Lanny Pell shifted from one foot to the other and tried to introduce the subject nearest to his thoughts. "Mr. Mortimer, I've been thinking—"

"Don't," A. J. Mortimer said nastily. "You're bad enough as it is. If you ever start thinking, you'll ruin me."

"Yes, sir." Lanny went ahead doggedly. "It says that this Alpheccan is

balled up the paper and threw it on the floor. "Pell," he said, "I've had enough of your get-rich-quick schemes. Every week its something different. But this is a new high in idiocy. Do you know what an Alpheccan looks like?"

"Sure. They look something like an octopus. But it says this one is wearing some kind of body case so he looks just like you and me."

"Maybe he looks like you, but not like me," Mortimer growled. "Do you also know that one Alpheccan is more than a match for ten *normal* Terrans? If I thought there was any chance of the Alpheccan finding you, I'd be happy to have you go out looking for him. Very happy. But since there isn't, you're to forget it. That's an order, Pell."

"Yes, sir," Lanny said. He retrieved the paper from the floor and thrust it back in his pocket. Even if he couldn't go looking for the Alpheccan, still he

might just happen to run across him if he kept his eyes open.

"Now, heaven help me," Mortimer said, "I've got to send you out on an assignment. Every other operator is out on a job. But, Pell, if you bungle this job in any way, so help me, I'll personally tie you to the tail of the next rocket bound for Deneb. Is that clear?"

"Yes sir. What's the job?"

"Mrs. Pierpont Clottingham, the Third, is giving a cocktail party and wants our best cloud job artistically decorating her drawing room. I hope I don't have to tell you that she is *the* social leader of Terra."

LANNY PELL brightened. The throwaway had mentioned that the fugitive might be found around important social functions. "I'll be very careful, sir," he said. "I promise you—I won't make any mistakes on this job."

"You'd better not," A. J. said grimly. "Not only because of Mrs. Clottingham, although she's reason enough. But one of her guests this afternoon will be Horace Anthony Pritchard, the Terran Secretary of Purchases. There is a fairly good chance that we may get the entire Terran weather account next year and if you do a good job that might cinch it."

"I'll do it, sir," Lanny said with determination.

"There is still another reason. In the next room is Jimwe Claid, a reporter for the Associated Martian Press. He's here to do a series of features on Clouds, Inc. I'm sending him out with you today—although I have an uneasy feeling that I ought to have my head examined. We are going to enter a bid on the Mars Reclamation Project next month and a good series of stories will help us get it. So I'm warning you, Pell, if you pull one boner on this job, I will personally skin you alive and have you stuffed and mounted in the lounge."

"I—I'll carry it off, sir."

"You'd better," Mortimer said darkly. He pressed a button on his desk. A moment later the door to the office opened and the Martian came in. Except for his

feather-like hair and his gold skin coloring, he might have been a Terran.

"Jimwe Claid," A. J. Mortimer said, "this is Lanny Pell, one of our youngest operators. You can go with him this afternoon and get an idea of the social end of our business. Tomorrow, you'll be able to go out with one of our more experienced men."

"Hi," said Jimwe Claid, offering a hand to Lanny. He sounded like a Terran reporter, too. "Hope I won't be in your way."

"Glad to have you," Lanny said, shaking the proffered hand.

"Better get started, Pell," A. J. Mortimer said with a meaningful glance. "This job should have been started an hour ago. You're to stay there, incidentally, until the party is over so you can decloud the room. Keep your mind on the job, Pell."

"Yes, sir," Lanny said. "Come on, Mr. Claid."

"Please call me Jimwe," the reporter said as he fell into step.

Up on the roof, Lanny Pell checked one of the light air-trucks to be sure it was fully equipped. He made sure that the throwaway was still in his pocket, then climbed into the truck. The Martian reporter took the seat beside him and the air-truck took off.

"So you're from Mars," Lanny said as he headed due north toward the more expensive residential section. "I've always wanted to go to Mars, but never been able to afford it."

"Not much to see," the reporter said. "You'd probably get pretty tired of staring at red hills all the time."

"I don't think so," Lanny said. "I guess maybe, being a reporter, you've been around over the galaxy a lot."

"Some."

"Ever seen an Alpheccan?"

"Only on the visiscreen," the reporter said. He grinned. "That's close enough for me. Why?"

"I was hoping you'd seen one. There's one here on Terra and I figure on keeping my eyes open. There's a reward of two million credits out for him."

The Martian whistled. "That's a lot of money. Still, I've seen pictures of them—so I guess I haven't lost any Alpheccans. You can have him."

Lanny wasn't sure whether the reporter was laughing at him or not. He didn't much care. He had a picture in his mind of himself flitting about the galaxy in one of the latest sport cruisers. It was an old picture, but it still looked good to him.

He brought the air-truck down on the parking roof of the Clottingham mansion and managed to bring it to a stop without even scraping one of the several cars that were parked there. Since this was quite a feat in itself for Lanny Pell, he felt that it was probably an auspicious omen.

THEY were met at the door by the Clottingham butler who conducted them to the main ballroom. He apparently took it for granted that the reporter was Lanny's assistant and asked no questions. He indicated the half-balcony at one end of the ballroom, heavily screened with potted plants, where they could wait while the party was in progress, and hinted that they'd better get to work or they'd be late. Then he left.

Since it was an indoor job, Lanny was using the portable cloud-maker. Of course, it was more than a mere cloud-maker—it was a complete unit with settings to take care of everything from a little play cloud no bigger than a man's fist to a full-scale cloudburst with thunder and lightning covering a continent. To one not familiar with the tools of Clouds, Inc., it might have seemed stretching a point to call it portable since the tank, when completely charged as it was now, was almost the size of a small ship. But it was equipped with a built-in anti-grav so that all Lanny had to do was push it along ahead of him. The tank, of course, folded up as the charge was exhausted.

The ballroom in the Clottingham home was the envy of many a less fortunate society matron. It was five stories high, with the balcony at one end about three

stories above the floor. It was more than two hundred yards in length and half that in width. The furnishings represented the finest work of a dozen star systems.

With two million credits, Lanny thought to himself, he could have a house like this if he wanted it. He was thinking about it as he pushed the tank to one end of the room and adjusted the controls.

"You know," said the reporter, breaking in on his thoughts, "I know nothing of this art of yours. I wonder if you could explain everything to me as you go along."

"I don't really have time now," Lanny said, glancing at his arm-time. "I'm late starting on the job and Mr. Mortimer might be pretty angry if I don't get everything done in time. I'll tell you what, you just watch me now and then later I'll explain it. I can give you the whole thing while we're declouding the room afterwards."

"Fine," the Martian agreed cheerfully.

"What kind of a story are you going to do?" Lanny asked, making the final adjustments on the nozzle.

"Oh, a complete one. A dramatized documentary for our local visiscreen plus a complete picture story for the facsimile sheets. Mr. Mortimer said he's set things up in a studio for us to take the still pictures and then he'll send a man up to work with us on the actual visicast. Maybe I can fix it for him to send you and you'll finally get that trip to Mars."

For a moment, Lanny was excited by the prospect, but then he remembered that he might get the two million credit reward before that. He grinned to himself as he thought how surprised the reporter would be to see him suddenly show up in style. Still grinning in anticipation, he went to work.

Cloud-making was an art—or, rather, it could be. There were many operators who had all they could do to handle the mechanical end—all the various changes of pressure, direction, force control, and then the proper mixture of colors, mois-

ture control, the control of electrical elements, and the precise sort of juggling of atoms that went into making the different types of clouds. The more successful operators were those who went beyond the mere mechanical job. They were able to create all the different cloud-forms and to give them the shape so familiar to everyone.

To give him his due, Lanny Pell possessed considerable artistic ability. Otherwise, he would have been fired long before. It was only when Lanny's day-dreaming got the upper hand that he got in trouble while on the job. That, however, was fairly often.

AS THE Martian reporter watched, Lanny moved across the room, putting a solid surface of light blue right up against the ceiling so that it would look like the sky. In one spot, he shot in a vivid spot of flaming yellow, which contained just enough subatomic elements to make it a reasonable reproduction of the sun.

Then, lowering his range, Lanny started back across the room. This time he was seeding the area just below the solid blue with delicate cirrus clouds, so feathery and threadlike they might have been fairy cloth. These were all white since most of the detail would have been lost if he had colored them. Moving on the normal air currents, they floated slowly about the room and the ceiling had already taken on the appearance of the natural sky.

Again, he lowered the range. And this time he began to form the rounded masses of cirro-cumulus and alto-cumulus clouds. The smaller ones were made with a short burst from the nozzle of the machine, the larger ones had to be built with several well-controlled bursts. It took a steady hand. Among these clouds, a few pastel colors were spotted.

An amazing change had come over Lanny Pell as he worked. Although he was still devoting some thought to the reward he hoped to get, most of his attention was on the shaping of the clouds and he moved with a sort of grace com-

pletely alien to his usual awkward manner.

The Martian reporter followed him, completely absorbed, occasionally making notes.

"One thing I don't quite understand," Jimwe Claid finally said. "These clouds must contain moisture or they wouldn't be clouds. How can you make sure that the temperature of the room, which may change, doesn't cause some of the clouds to release the moisture in the shape of rain?"

"We have moisture controls," Lanny grunted. "But more important we have a temperature control that makes it impossible for anything to go wrong mechanically. Whenever there's any rain from these decoration jobs, you can be sure that it's because the operator made a mistake and built rain clouds. The same applies to thunder or lightning. It's happened occasionally." He shuddered a little, remembering that he was the operator who had made it happen.

"Temperature control?" the reporter asked, making one of his notes. "That sounds interesting. How does it work?"

"I can't tell you," Larry said. "Matter of fact, I don't even know. It's a patented invention of Mr. Mortimer's. It's been taken over by the Security Department, although they still let Mr. Mortimer use it."

The reporter looked puzzled. "Why the Security Department? I can see where temperature control might have a lot of uses, but I fail to see why the military would be interested in it."

Lanny Pell adjusted the range, threw one of the color switches, and started building a blue cumulus cloud. This was where the real art came in and Lanny tried to concentrate even harder as he shaped the fluffy rolling cloud. "I don't know much about it," he muttered, "but I guess it would make about the cheapest kind of war. We use a pretty small temperature fuse—that's what Mr. Mortimer calls it—but if somebody used the large ones. I guess maybe they could put such a tight control on the weather that they could destroy a whole planet. They

could do it slow, drying up the planet, or flooding it, or turning it to ice. Or they could do it fast with lightning storms that would burn the whole planet. I doubt if they'll let you write much about that."

"I guess you're right," the reporter said ruefully.

Moving more slowly, Lanny went across the room building his multicolored clouds.

"Speaking of rain clouds," he said as he put the finishing touches to a cloud, "look at this. It's an imitation cumulonimbus or rain cloud. No rain in it at all, but it looks like the real thing. Pretty good, huh?"

The reporter looked at the low-lying cloud, angrily black and threatening, and could almost feel the air grow damp. "Looks perfect to me," he said. "One look and I feel like reaching for a raincoat."

Lanny laughed. "Just an imitation," he said. He went on building his clouds, carefully spotting them, and giving variety not only in colors but in shapes. Some of the cumulous clouds looked like giant faces peering down at them, while some had vague animal shapes. All of them were built in scale, so that while they were only two stories above the floor, they appeared to be much higher and to be far larger than they were.

IT LACKED ONLY a half hour before the time set for the party when Lanny Pell finished and took a quick inspection stroll around the room. He instinctively knew that it was one of the best jobs he'd ever done and he felt that to be a good omen, too.

When he was sure that it was as perfect as he could make it, he added the final touch. In one corner of the room, he built a small pink cloud that was their newest special. Its bottom was only two inches above the floor and it was no more than six feet in diameter. What moisture it contained was composed of the finest Angolian perfume. Any woman guest could walk through the cloud and emerge subtly scented with the most

seductive and expensive perfume in the universe.

The butler returned just as he finished, and although nothing was said Lanny could tell that Mrs. Clottingham III would be pleased. Butlers were always harder to satisfy than their mistresses.

Lanny pushed his tank—there was still a half charge remaining—upstairs and put it away in the air-truck. Then he returned with the declouder. It was much smaller, since all it had to do was milk the small amount of moisture from the clouds. The wisps that remained were allowed to blow out of open windows.

The butler conducted the two men to the balcony where a maid soon served them with refreshments. From the spot where they sat they could see the entire room, except where it was obscured by low clouds, without being seen.

It was ideal, Lanny thought. From the balcony he could observe the guests and if the distinguished Alpheccan were among them he'd be sure to spot him. The afternoon had gone so well he was positive that his hunch would work out.

Slowly, the room began to fill up with people. The women were all beautiful and as daringly dressed as only the very rich could be, while the men were smoothly groomed and filled with dignity.

"You ever stop to think," Lanny asked, overcome with the vision, "how much money is represented down there? I'll bet there isn't a man there worth less than a billion."

"Pretty plush," the reporter admitted. "Bigger than anything we have on Mars."

Servants circulated through the room, pushing anti-grav trays ahead of them, and the cocktail party was well under way.

After a while, Lanny had to admit to himself that there was a sameness about the guests that was baffling. If the Alpheccan was there, he had certainly managed to capture the quality that made all the men look alike. But he was

determined, and he leaned over the railing, watching carefully for the slightest action which might seem alien.

He was so absorbed in his task that he failed to hear the low rumble of sound that drew a startled exclamation from his companion and even distracted a number of conversations on the floor below. It was only when the first few drops of rain splattered against his cheek that Lanny Pell looked up.

There was another rolling rumble of thunder. Then, suddenly, with no other warning, the clouds—the lacy white, the threatening black, and all the pretty pink, cerise, magenta, emerald, saffron, heliotrope, azure, robin-egg blue, orange, and plaid clouds—opened up and a torrent of rain pelted every inch of the ballroom.

For a full minute, Lanny Pell stared at the clouds, while the rain beat on his face, not really comprehending what had happened. His lips moved in silent speech as he mentally back-tracked every step of the job.

Then it struck him. He had turned the dials, thrown the switches, pushed the buttons—did everything, in fact, except to set the moisture control. It was exactly the same thing that had happened to him once before, when he was still in the middle of counting how many beans would go in a spaceship; only then it had occurred in a studio with only a few cameramen present and this time it was the ballroom of Mrs. Pierpont Clottingham III. The presence of the "III" made his crime thrice as heinous.

HE LOOKED frantically about him. Everyone had tried to find some shelter. Even the Martian reporter was crouched beneath the table. Below, there were people huddled beneath anti-grav serving tables or under the inadequate leaves of giant potted plants. But not all could make it. One girl, whose dress had been made of spun sugar, was doing a syrupy strip-tease which was failing to attract the attention it deserved. A couple of slightly drunken financiers had

gravely removed their shoes and socks and were splashing about in the water which was already an inch thick on the floor. One doughty old gentleman—the very picture of interplanetary finance—had just tasted his drink and was loudly complaining that someone had watered it. He seemed oblivious to the rain.

Mrs. Pierpont Clottingham III stood in the very center of the downpour and screamed with every ounce of her blue-blooded energy. The butler and fourteen footmen hovered about her trying to translate the scream into intelligible orders.

It was a time for even brave men to retreat. Hardier men than Lanny Pell, under less trying circumstances, had been known to become hermits on Deneb Kaitos. But Lanny, once the first shock had worn off, hurried downstairs and courageously waded toward Mrs. Clottingham. He had some vague idea of repairing his bridges, (and never were bridges more needed) of healing the fresh wounds and somehow saving the day for Clouds, Inc. But he never reached the outraged hostess.

An elderly, once-distinguished looking man sloshed by Lanny and headed resolutely for the door, a small current of water eddying after him. It needed no prolonged look to see that he was angry. Lanny almost didn't look the second time. But some little fact impressed itself on him enough so that after a few more steps he whirled for a belated doubletake.

The man's fine dress clothes, bearing what looked like a number of important decorations, were sopping wet. Water streamed down his face just as it did on several hundred other faces. But his hair, a beautiful silver gray, was dry. Not only that, but as Lanny took a closer look, he saw that when the rain was within a fraction of an inch of the hair it suddenly evaporated so that not a single drop touched the hair.

Lanny Pell hesitated for only a moment, his heart thudding loudly. He'd been watching for some one little trait that would be different and here was a

man whose hair couldn't get wet. There was something else, Lanny suddenly realized. There had been a very small amount of thunder and Alpheccans couldn't stand thunder. And this man was the only one who was leaving, hurrying pell mell for the front door.

Lanny hesitated no longer. He turned and raced upstairs as fast as he could.

He burst out on the roof and leaped into the air-truck. He kicked on the starter and went up with a rush, tearing the fender off a Fleetwing Cadillac that had parked too near the truck.

BELOW, he could see the man standing on the street, hailing an air-cab. One of the orange crafts was swooping down to pick up the fare. Lanny hovered at the edge of the building, partially concealed, and waited. When the cab left, he followed, keeping above and well behind it so there was little danger of being spotted.

When they reached the suburban area of Newconn a few minutes later, the taxi began to descend. It was obviously heading for the parking roof of the largest apartment house. As soon as he was certain of this, Lanny sent the air-truck darting down ahead of it. He parked in the delivery section and tried to think of the next move.

He dug around in the back of the truck and found a box of color cartridges that hadn't been unpacked. It would have been better if it were wrapped in paper, but even so it would do. Putting it under his arm, he timed his exit from the truck so that he and the man reached the elevators together.

The man's face had dried, but not his clothes, and apparently his temper had improved but little. Lanny tried not to look at him as they entered the elevator, knowing that too close an examination might make him suspicious.

The elevator dropped down only as far as the two hundredth floor. Lanny followed the man off, hoping that it wouldn't be a single dwelling floor. But here his luck deserted him. It was a duplex wing, with a short stairway leading

to a second level apartment entrance. As Lanny paused uncertainly, the man first became aware of him.

"What do you want?" he demanded harshly.

"Package for Sanderson, sir," Lanny said, hoping he sounded like a delivery boy. "You Mr. Sanderson, sir?"

"No," the man said curtly. "You'd better consult the house index instead of wandering about like an idiot."

"Yes, sir," Lanny said and darted back into the elevator, glad to get away from those penetrating eyes.

Just to make sure, he dropped the elevator all the way to the ground floor, waited a minute, and then ascended to the roof again. He went out and sat in the truck while he thought about what to do next.

It was clever of the Alpheccan to hide out in such an apartment house. No one ever thought of looking for a fugitive or imposter among the very rich.

Lanny Pell was certain that he'd found the Alpheccan. The problem was what to do about it. His first thought was to immediately call the Security Patrol, but there was always the chance that they wouldn't even believe him. They might not want to take the chance of being wrong and offending someone who was wealthy and influential. On the other hand, he thought, even if they did believe him, they might find some way of claiming the reward for themselves and cheating him out of it. He'd heard of the Security Patrol doing such things. He decided he'd have to make the identification more definite, so there could be no chance of him being shoved out.

He pulled the throwaway from his pocket and glanced at it again. One sentence caught his eye again. "... since Alphecca has neither thunder nor lightning storms, he may be sensitive to. . . ." It was then that Lanny was struck by a brilliant inspiration.

Except for himself, the roof was deserted. He opened the back of the truck and switched on the anti-grav on the portable cloud-maker. He pushed it over to the edge of the roof. He made an ad-

justment on the machine, thrust the nozzle over the edge and began throwing a layer of fog around the two-hundredth floor. He knew there was a slight gamble in this method, but he thought it might work. The Alpheccan would be curious about it, but he wouldn't be apt to know that it had been years since there had been a natural fog on Terra. The servants—he must have servants in so large an apartment—would know better, but he could probably finish the job before a complaint was made.

WHEN there was a thick wall of fog around all the windows of the floor, Lanny Pell quickly buckled on his own anti-grav belt and slipped over the roof, pushing the tank ahead of him. He descended and vanished into the fog.

He worked fast once he was hovering outside the two-hundredth floor. He worked his way around the building, ignoring the three or four rooms in which he spotted persons. At the other rooms, he deftly cut a small circle of glass from a window and thrust through the nozzle of the cloud-maker. The temperature, moisture and electrical controls were turned all the way up. When he'd covered every empty room, he picked the largest occupied room and repeated the operation, ignoring the startled cries from inside.

When he'd finished, he adjusted the studs on his belt and quickly rose to the roof. He stowed the empty tank away in the truck. He unscrewed the nozzle and put it on a microtank, so small that it contained only one charge. Then he hurried into the elevator and went down to the two-hundredth floor. He took up his position beside the door.

Inside the apartment, a storm of hurricane proportions was already in progress. Thunder crashed so loudly that the whole building shook. Lightning flashed inside the apartment, crackling and destroying. Once a wall cracked so badly that a hair-line appeared out in the corridor. The wind howled.

Although he couldn't hear it, Lanny knew that every inch of the apartment

was being drenched in rain.

Suddenly the door was flung open. The man, now wearing an expensive dressing robe, staggered into the corridor. Once again water was pouring from his face—and it bore an expression that indicated the man thought the world had come to an end—and the robe was soggy with wetness. But the man's hair was still dry. That was all Lanny was waiting to see.

He triggered the nozzle and a small dense cloud suddenly sprung into being around the man's head as he floundered ahead trying to escape from an apartment which had seemingly gone mad.

Lanny Pell dropped his microtank, thrust out his foot, and reached into the cloud to give the man a shove.

There was a startled yelp, followed by a crashing sound as the man rolled down the stairs. Then all was quiet, except for the muffled sounds of the storm within the apartment. The man lay unconscious at the foot of the stairs and the cloud floated off down the corridor.

Lanny had expected the fall to be enough to crack the body case which the Alpheccan wore, but he could see this hadn't happened. It must have been better built than he'd expected. But the fall had knocked him out, so there was still time.

Unscrewing the nozzle from the microtank, so he'd have a weapon of sorts, Lanny approached the sprawled figure. He knelt and looked at it. He marveled at the craftsmanship that had gone into the body casing. It had been made so well that it even simulated the pallor that could be expected in an unconscious man. Lanny prodded the flesh with one finger and marveled even more. It felt just like real flesh.

He had thrown back the wet robe and was carefully searching for the seam that would show where the body casing had been welded when there was a groan and the man's eyes opened. For a moment there was nothing but bewilderment in them as they stared at the serious young man who was prodding and pulling at his flesh.

Lanny Pell held the nozzle in readiness and watched him carefully.

Comprehension returned to the man's eyes and with it rage. "Suffering Formalhaut," he roared. "What the devil do you think you're doing?"

"Looking for your seam, sir," Lanny said.

"My what?"

"Your seam. I must admit that your body case has been built very well."

THE man glanced from Lanny to the door of the apartment beyond which the sounds of the raging storm could still be heard. Then he put both hands to his head. For a moment Lanny thought he was merely going to unscrew his head and finally reveal himself. But the man only spread his hands and looked at Lanny with bloodshot eyes.

"Are you," he asked evenly, "responsible for what is happening in my apartment?"

"Oh, yes," Lanny said. "I knew you were sensitive to thunder and lightning, so I felt sure it would chase you out of the apartment."

"I suppose," the man continued after rubbing one hand over his face—probably making sure that he still looked like a Terran—"you were also responsible for that cloudburst at the home of Mrs. Clottingham?"

Lanny nodded. "But that was an accident. I didn't know for sure that you were there."

The man propped himself up on one elbow. He seemed to be shaking slightly as though a storm was going on inside him, too. "Young man, who do you think I am?"

"Why," Lanny said in surprise, "the Alpheccan. The one the reward is offered for." For the first time, a small doubt crept into Lanny's mind. "A-aren't you?"

"I," said the man, enunciating each word with a terrible clarity, "am Horace Anthony Pritchard, Secretary of Purchases for the Federation of Terra. This apartment, in which you have just introduced a tropical hurricane, is my

home and has been for ten years."

"But you were the only one who ran out of the apartment," Lanny said, trying to cling to a shattered theory. Somewhere in the back of his mind there was a painful memory of A. J. Mortimer mentioning something about the Secretary of Purchases.

"Because everyone else is huddled in the one room where it isn't raining and there was no room for me. Although I can't think how you happened to miss that one room."

"But—but—" Lanny searched around for a solid fact and thought he found one—"but your hair didn't get wet. It vaporized the water before it could even touch your hair."

"That," the man said, slapping his head so hard that his hairline suddenly slipped askew, "is because I'm wearing the very latest water-repelling plastic wig—if you must know." There was a strangled quality to his voice.

"But—" Lanny was still trying.

"Look," the man shouted. He pulled up one soggy sleeve, revealing the code in tattoo which every official had on his arm. This code was in the low numbers indicating that he was certainly of cabinet rank.

Lanny could only stare at it in shattered acceptance.

"Now," the man said; his voice rising even higher, "I suppose you work for that infernal cloud-making company that decorated the party—the one that has been wanting the Terran account. Young man, if it's the last thing I ever do I'll—"

Lanny Pell fled, not waiting to hear what he intended to do. Even in the elevator, his legs jerked with spasmodic running motions, as it carried him swiftly upwards.

But once he was on the roof, Lanny didn't possess the energy to climb into the air-truck. He sat on the front bumper and gloomily contemplated a world in which the sun still dared to shine.

He was so lost in self-pity that he didn't hear the aircab come down and land near him. Nor did he hear the

approaching footsteps. It was only when they stopped and his name was called that he looked up and saw the Martian reporter.

"There you are," the latter exclaimed. "You know, you ran out of the party so fast I couldn't catch you before you took off. I've been looking for you ever since."

"Yeah," said Lanny. He'd forgotten all about the reporter, but he guessed it didn't make much difference now.

"Can't say I blame you for running out. The party was certainly a wash-out—heh-heh—full of wet blankets. Guess something went wrong, huh?"

"Yeah," said Lanny sourly, ignoring the gambit.

"Well, I'm glad I found you," the reporter continued cheerfully. "Are you all through now?"

"Yeah, I'm all through," Lanny said. There couldn't be any doubt about it; Mr. Mortimer would see to that.

"Good," said the reporter as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened. "Now, maybe you'll explain how everything works. You know, I'd intended to ask you—maybe right here's a good spot. Do you suppose you could let me make just one cloud myself? You could show me how."

LANNY started to explain that it was against the law to make a cloud over the city without a government contract, but he stopped. Maybe, he thought, Mr. Mortimer wouldn't be quite so mad if the Martian publicity was still salvaged. He went around to the back of the truck and saw there was still one charge left in the big tank. It wouldn't make much difference what sort of cloud the reporter made, so he didn't check the rest of it. He handed the nozzle over.

"Just point it straight up and pull the trigger," he said.

The reporter followed the instructions. About forty feet over their heads a large black cloud suddenly puffed into existence. Lanny saw the color and started to shout, but he was too late.

A great jagged streak of lightning flashed down out of the cloud. It glanced off the air-truck, with a screech of tearing metal, bounced off Lanny's weather-resistant suit and struck the reporter.

So much had already happened to Lanny Pell that he was already numb before the lightning struck. It was a minute or so before he recovered enough to look around to see what damage had been done. The first thing he saw was the air-truck. It was only a lump of twisted and fused metal.

There was the scream of a siren and a black and white security car plummeted from the air. It had barely touched the roof before the officer, weapon in hand, was out and walking toward Lanny.

"What's going on here?" he demanded.

"Not very much," Lanny said, not even conscious that he was probably uttering the understatement of the year.

"Illegal creation of lightning," the officer said severely as he reached Lanny's side. "I'm afraid I'll have to—"

He broke off and Lanny seeing the expression in his eyes followed the direction of his gaze until he too was looking at the Martian reporter lying on the roof. The lightning bolt had hit him squarely on the chest and run down to ground itself on the metal roof. The body of the reporter was split open as neatly as though someone had merely unfastened a zipper. Inside, folded into the various sections of the body case, there was something that resembled an octopus.

"You found it?" the officer asked.

Having dreamed of this moment all afternoon, Lanny Pell was not to be undone by a mere miracle.

"I—" He faltered once and then hit his stride—"that is, I did. He—it was trying to steal our cloud-making formula and I tricked him into making that cloud up there, with a high electrical potential, with the results which you already see. Knowing that one Terran is no match for an Alpheccan, I thought it might be wiser to have him knocked

out like this."

"Damned clever," the officer said admiringly. "I didn't know you people could control lightning that well."

Lanny contented himself with grunting modestly.

The rain began falling from the cloud above them. The water pelting Lanny's face felt like ambrosia.

IT WAS almost quitting time when Lanny Pell strode into Clouds, Inc., ignoring Solina Grayba's scornful sniff, and swaggered to the president's private office. He opened the door and walked in.

"Hi, A. J.," he said confidently. He was so busy with his new personality that he failed to notice the fiendish expression on A. J. Mortimer's face.

"Well," the latter said with forced calm, "I've been waiting for you, Pell. There're one or two little matters which I thought we might discuss."

"Sorry, A. J.," Lanny said briskly, "I've got no time for one of your discussions. I only dropped in to tell you that I'm quitting and you can take your jobs and your clouds and shove—"

"Quitting, are you?" A. J. Mortimer interrupted gently. "Got another job, I suppose?"

"No," Lanny said. This was his big moment. "I captured that Alpheccan so I have two million credits coming to me."

"Yes, I know about that. In fact, you will find that Clouds, Inc., has already attached your two million credits. It will be paid to us in the morning. According to my accountants, that leaves you owing us only fifty thousand credits. You can pay that off in monthly installments."

"What?"

"Of course, something else may still come in and you'll owe us more, but that's all it is as of now."

"What are you talking about?" Lanny said desperately. "I won that two

million credits. You can't take it away from me."

"Can't I now?" A. J. said. "You're forgetting one or two small things, my boy. First, there is the matter of Mrs. Pierpont Clottingham, the Third. She is suing us for five hundred thousand credits. Then there is Horace Anthony Pritchard. He is putting in a claim for a million and a half—a conservative estimate since everything in his apartment is ruined. Our lawyers advise settling quickly. Then thirty-two thousand credits for the air-truck, seventeen thousand, seven hundred and twenty credits in fines, and two hundred and eighty credits for a new uniform for the Security officer. His uniform was ruined in the rain. Under the circumstances, I think you'd better continue working for us, Pell. We'll deduct from your salary until the rest of the account is settled."

"But—" Lanny faltered.

"In the meantime," roared A. J. Mortimer, hitting his desk with a clenched fist, "get out of here before I remember that you also lost us the Terran account and completely lose my temper."

"Yes, sir," Lanny Pell said sadly. He turned and walked slowly out of the office.

He had the air of a beaten man as he shambled past Miss Grayba's desk. But suddenly he stopped and stared through the window. Then his shoulders straightened with a snap of self confidence.

Across the street two men had just finished putting up a new animated sign. THE NEW MYSTERY DRINK, it announced. THE NEW INVIGORATING DRINK THAT'S FULL OF ZIP. NAME IT AND WIN ONE MILLION CREDITS PLUS A NEW COMET CRUISER. FIVE MILLION ADDITIONAL PRIZES.

"Full of zip," Lanny Pell said to himself. "Zip—zip—Zipsicola! That's it!"

Whistling to himself, he sauntered briskly through the door.

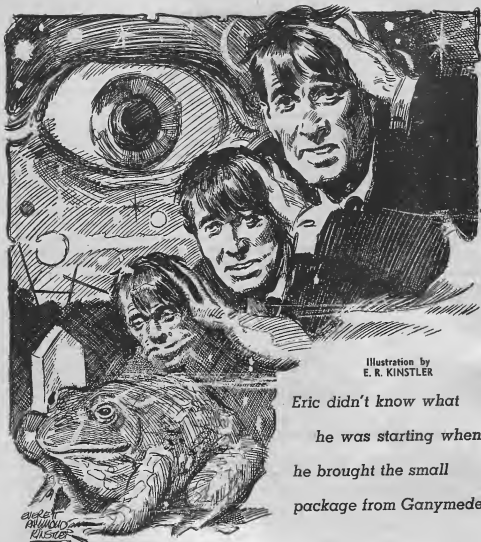


Illustration by
E. R. KINSTLER

*Eric didn't know what
he was starting when
he brought the small
package from Ganymede*

A Present for PAT

By
PHILIP K. DICK

WHAT is it?" Patricia Blake demanded eagerly.

"What's what?" Eric Blake murmured.

"What did you bring? I *know* you brought me something!" Her bosom rose and fell excitedly under her mesh blouse. "You brought me a present. I can tell!"

"Honey, I went to Ganymede for Ter-ran Metals, not to find you curios. Now let me unpack my things. Bradshaw says

I have to report to the office early tomorrow. He says I better report some good ore deposits."

Pat snatched up a small box, heaped with all the other luggage the robot porter had deposited at the door. "Is it jewelry? No, it's too big for jewelry." She began to tear the cord from the box with her sharp fingernails.

Eric frowned uneasily. "Don't be disappointed, honey. It's sort of strange. Not what you expect." He watched apprehensively. "Don't get mad at me. I'll explain all about it."

Pat's mouth fell open. She turned pale. She dropped the box quickly on the table, eyes wide with horror. "Good Lord! What is it?"

Eric twisted nervously. "I got a good buy on it, honey. You can't usually pick one of them up. The Ganymedeans don't like to sell them, and I—"

"What is it?"

"It's a god," Eric muttered. "A minor Ganymedean deity. I got it practically at cost."

Pat gazed down at the box with fear and growing disgust. "That? That's a —a god?"

In the box was a small, motionless figure, perhaps ten inches high. It was old, terribly old. Its tiny clawlike hands were pressed against its scaly breast. Its insect face was twisted in a scowl of anger—mixed with cynical lust. Instead of legs it rested on a tangle of tentacles. The lower portion of its face dissolved in a complex beak, mandibles of some hard substance. There was an odor to it, as of manure and stale beer. It appeared to be bi-sexual.

Eric had thoughtfully put a little water dish and some straw in the box. He had punched air holes in the lid and crumbled up newspaper fragments.

"You mean it's an idol." Pat regained her poise slowly. "An idol of a deity."

"No." Eric shook his head stubbornly. "This is a genuine deity. There's a warranty, or something."

"Is it—dead?"

"Not at all."

"Then why doesn't it move?"

"You have to arouse it." The bottom of the figure's belly cupped outward in a hollow bowl. Eric tapped the bowl. "Place an offering here and it comes to life. I'll show you."

Pat retreated. "No thanks."

"Come on! It's interesting to talk to. Its name is—" he glanced at some writing on the box. "Its name is Tinokuknoi Arevulopapo. We talked most of the way back from Ganymede. It was glad of the opportunity. And I learned quite a few things about gods."

ERIC searched his pockets and brought out the remains of a ham sandwich. He wadded up a bit of the ham and stuffed it into the protruding belly-cup of the god.

"I'm going in the other room," Pat said.

"Stick around." Eric caught her arm. "It only takes a second. It begins to digest right away."

The belly-cup quivered. The god's scaly flesh rippled. Presently the cup filled with a sluggish dark-colored substance. The ham began to dissolve.

Pat snorted in disgust. "Doesn't it even use its mouth?"

"Not for eating. Only for talking. It's a lot different from usual life-forms."

The tiny eye of the god was focused on them now. A single, unwinking orb of icy malevolence. The mandibles twitched.

"Greetings," the god said.

"Hi." Eric nudged Pat forward. "This is my wife. Mrs. Blake. Patricia."

"How do you do," the god grated.

Pat gave a squeal of dismay. "It talks English."

The god turned to Eric in disgust. "You were right. She is stupid."

Eric colored. "Gods can do anything they want, honey. They're omnipotent."

The god nodded. "That is so. This is Terra, I presume."

"Yes. How does it look?"

"As I expected, I have already heard reports. Certain reports about Terra."

"Eric, are you sure it's safe?" Pat whispered uneasily. "I don't like its looks. And there's something about the

way it talks." Her bosom quivered nervously.

"Don't worry, honey," Eric said carelessly. "It's a nice god. I checked before I left Ganymede."

"I'm benevolent," the god explained matter-of-factly. "My capacity has been that of Weather Deity to the Ganymedean aborigines. I have produced rain and allied phenomena when the occasion demanded."

"But that's all in the past," Eric added.

"Correct. I have been a Weather Deity for ten thousand years. There is a limit to even a god's patience. I craved new surroundings." A peculiar gleam flickered across the loathsome face. "That is why I arranged to be sold and brought to Terra."

"You see," Eric said, "the Ganymedeans didn't want to sell it. But it whipped up a thunder storm and they sort of had to. That's partly why it was so cheap."

"Your husband made a good purchase," the god said. Its single eye roved around curiously. "This is your dwelling? You eat and sleep here?"

"That's right," Eric said. "Pat and I both—"

THE front door chimed. "Thomas Matson stands on the threshold," the door stated. "He wishes admission."

"Golly," Eric said. "Good old Tom. I'll go let him in."

Pat indicated the god. "Hadn't you better—"

"Oh, no. I want Tom to see it." Eric stepped to the door and opened it.

"Hello," Tom said, striding in. "Hi, Pat. Nice day." He and Eric shook hands. "The Lab has been wondering when you'd get back. Old Bradshaw is leaping up and down to hear your report." Matson's bean-pole body bent forward in sudden interest. "Say, what's in the box?"

"That's my god," Eric said modestly.

"Really? But God is an unscientific concept."

"This is a different god. I didn't invent it. I bought it. On Ganymede. It's

a Ganymedean Weather Deity."

"Say something," Pat said to the god.

"So he'll believe your owner."

"Let's debate my existence," the god said sneeringly. "You take the negative. Agreed?"

Matson grinned. "What is this, Eric? A little robot? Sort of hideous looking."

"Honest. It's a god. On the way it did a couple of miracles for me. Not big miracles, of course, but enough to convince me."

"Hearsay," Matson said. But he was interested. "Pass a miracle, god. I'm all ears."

"I am not a vulgar showpiece," the god growled.

"Don't get it angry," Eric cautioned. "There's no limit to its powers, once aroused."

"How does a god come into being?" Tom asked. "Does a god create itself? If it's dependent on something prior then there must be a more ultimate order of being which—"

"Gods," the tiny figure stated, "are inhabitants of a higher level, a greater plane of reality. A more advanced dimension. There are a number of planes of existence. Dimensional continuums, arranged in a hierarchy. Mine is one above yours."

"What are you doing here?"

"Occasionally beings pass from one dimensional continuum to another. When they pass from a superior continuum to an inferior—as I have done—they are worshipped as gods."

TOM was disappointed. "You're not a god at all. You're just a life-form of a slightly different dimensional order that's changed phase and entered our vector."

The little figure glowered. "You make it sound simple. Actually, such a transformation requires great cunning and is seldom done. I came here because a member of my race, a certain malodorous Nar Dolk, committed a heinous crime and escaped into this continuum. Our law obliged me to follow in hot pursuit. In the process this flotsam, this spawn of damp-

ness, escaped and assumed some disguise or other. I continually search, but he has not yet been apprehended." The small god broke off suddenly. "Your curiosity is idle. It annoys me."

Tom turned his back on the god. "Pretty weak stuff. We do more down at the Terran Metals Lab than this character ever—"

The air cracked, ozone flashing. Tom Matson shrieked. Invisible hands lifted him bodily and propelled him to the door. The door swung open and Matson sailed down the walk, tumbling in a heap among the rose bushes, arms and legs flailing wildly.

"Help!" Matson yelled, struggling to get up.

"Oh, dear," Pat gasped.

"Golly," Eric shot a glance at the tiny figure. "You did that?"

"Help him," Pat urged, white-faced. "I think he's hurt. He looks funny."

Eric hurried outside and helped Matson to his feet. "You okay? It's your own fault. I told you if you kept annoying it something might happen."

Matson's face was ablaze with rage. "No little pipsqueak god is going to treat me like this!" He pushed Eric aside, heading back for the house. "I'll take it down to the Lab and pop it in a bottle of formaldehyde. I'll dissect it and skin it and hang it up on the wall. I'll have the first specimen of a god known to—"

A ball of light glowed around Matson. The ball enveloped him, settling in place around his lean body so that he looked like a filament in an incandescent light.

"What the hell!" Matson muttered. Suddenly he jerked. His body faded. He began to shrink. With a faint whoosh he diminished rapidly. Smaller and smaller he dwindled. His body shuddered, altering strangely.

The light winked out. Sitting stupidly on the walk was a small green toad.

"See?" Eric said wildly. "I told you to keep quiet! Now look what it's done!"

The toad hopped feebly toward the house. At the porch it sagged into immobility, defeated by the steps. It uttered a pathetic, hopeless *chug*.

Pat's voice rose in a wail of anguish. "Oh, Eric! Look what it's done! Poor Tom!"

"His own fault," Eric said. "He deserves it." But he was beginning to get nervous. "Look here," he said to the god. "That's not a very nice thing to do to a grown man. What'll his wife and kids think?"

"What'll Mr. Bradshaw think?" Pat cried. "He can't go to work like that!"

"True," Eric admitted. He appealed to the god. "I think he's learned his lesson. How about turning him back? Okay?"

"You just better undo him!" Pat shrieked, clenching her small fists. "If you don't undo him you'll have Terran Metals after you. Even a god can't stand up to Horace Bradshaw."

"Better change him back," Eric said.

"It'll do him good," the god said. "I'll leave him that way for a couple of centuries—"

"Centuries!" Pat exploded. "Why, you little blob of slime!" She advanced ominously toward the box, shaking with wrath. "See here! You turn him back or I'll take you out of your box and drop you into the garbage disposal unit!"

"Make her be still," the god said to Eric.

"Calm down, Pat," Eric implored.

"I will not calm down! Who does it think it is? A fine present! How dare you bring this moldy bit of refuse into our house? Is this your idea of a—"

Her voice ceased abruptly.

ERIC turned apprehensively. Pat stood rigid, her mouth open, a word still on her lips. She did not move. She was white all over. A solid gray-white that made cold chills leap up Eric's spine. "Good Lord," he said.

"I turned her to stone," the god explained. "She made too much noise." It yawned. "Now, I think I'll retire. I'm a little tired, after my trip."

"I can't believe it," Eric Blake said. He shook his head numbly. "My best friend a toad. My wife turned to stone."

"It's true," the god said. "We deal out

justice according to how people act. They both got what they deserved."

"Can—can she hear me?"

"I suppose."

Eric went over to the statue. "Pat," he begged imploringly. "Please don't be mad. It isn't my fault." He gripped her ice-cold shoulders. "Don't blame me! I didn't do it." The granite was hard and smooth under his fingers. Pat stared blankly ahead.

"Terran Metals indeed," the god grumbled sourly. Its single eye studied Eric intently. "Who is this Horace Bradshaw? Some local deity, perhaps?"

"Horace Bradshaw owns Terran Metals," Eric said gloomily. He sat down and shakily lit a cigarette. "He's about the biggest man on Terra. Terran Metals owns half the planets in the system."

"Kingdoms of this world do not interest me," the god said non-committally, subsiding and shutting its eye. "I will retire, now. I wish to contemplate certain matters. You may wake me later, if you wish. We can converse on theological subjects, as we did on the ship coming here."

"Theological subjects," Eric said bitterly. "My wife a stone block and it wants to talk about religion."

But the god was already withdrawn, retired into itself.

"A lot you care," Eric muttered. Anger flickered in him. "This is the thanks I get for taking you off Ganymede. Ruin my household and my social life. Fine good you are!"

No response.

Eric concentrated desperately. Maybe when the god awoke it would be in a better mood. Maybe he could persuade it to turn Matson and Pat back to their usual forms. Faint hope stirred. He could appeal to the god's better side. After it had rested and slept for a few hours. . .

If nobody came looking for Matson.

The toad sat disconsolately on the walk, drooping with misery. Eric leaned toward it. "Hey, Matson!"

The toad looked slowly up.

"Don't worry, old man. I'll get it to turn you back. It's a cinch." The toad

didn't stir. "A lead-pipe cinch," Eric repeated nervously.

THE toad drooped a little more. Eric looked at his watch. It was late afternoon, almost four. Tom's shift at Terran began in half an hour. Sweat came out on his forehead. If the god went on sleeping and didn't wake up in half an hour—

A buzz. The vidphone.

Eric's heart sank. He hurried over and clicked the screen on, steeling himself. Horace Bradshaw's sharp, dignified features faded into focus. His keen glance bored into Eric, penetrating his depths.

"Blake," he grunted. "Back from Ganymede, I see."

"Yes, sir." Eric's mind raced frantically. He moved in front of the screen, cutting off Bradshaw's view of the room. "I'm just starting to unpack."

"Forget that and get over here! We're waiting to hear your report."

"Right now? Gosh, Mr. Bradshaw. Give me a chance to get my things away." He fought desperately for time. "I'll be over tomorrow morning bright and early."

"Is Matson there with you?"

Eric swallowed. "Yes, sir. But—"

"Put him on. I want to talk to him."

"He—he can't talk to you right now, sir."

"What? Why not?"

"He's in no shape to—that is, he—"

Bradshaw snarled impatiently. "Then bring him along with you. And he better be sober when he gets here. I'll see you at my office in ten minutes." He broke the circuit. The screen faded abruptly.

Eric sank wearily down in a chair. His mind reeled. Ten minutes! He shook his head, stunned.

The toad hopped a little, stirring on the walk. It emitted a faint, despondent sound.

Eric got heavily to his feet. "I guess we have to face the music," he murmured. He bent down and picked up the toad, putting it gingerly in his coat pocket. "I guess you heard. That was Bradshaw."

We're going down to the Lab."

The toad stirred uneasily.

"I wonder what Bradshaw is going to say when he sees you." Eric kissed his wife's cold granite cheek. "Good-by, honey." He moved numbly down the walk to the street. A moment later he hailed a robot cab and entered it. "I have a feeling this is going to be hard to explain." The cab zipped off down the street. "Hard as hell to explain."

HORACE BRADSHAW stared in dumbfounded amazement. He removed his steel-rimmed glasses and wiped them slowly. He fitted them back on his hard, hawklike face and peered down. The toad rested silently in the center of the immense mahogany desk.

Bradshaw pointed shakily at the toad. "This—is this is Thomas Matson?"

"Yes sir," Eric said.

Bradshaw blinked in wonder. "Matson! What in the world has happened to you?"

"He's a toad," Eric explained.

"So I see. Incredible." Bradshaw pressed a stud on his desk. "Send in Jennings from the Biology Lab," he ordered. "A toad." He poked the toad with his pencil. "Is it really you, Matson?"

The toad *chugged*.

"Good Lord." Bradshaw sat back, wiping his forehead. His grim expression faded into sympathetic concern. He shook his head sadly. "I can't believe it. Some kind of bacterial blight, I suppose. Matson was always experimenting on himself. He took his work seriously. A brave man. A good worker. He did much for Terran Metals. Too bad he had to end this way. We'll extend full pension to him, of course."

Jennings entered the office. "You wanted me, sir?"

"Come in." Bradshaw beckoned him impatiently in. "We have a problem for your department. You know Eric Blake here."

"Hi, Blake."

"And Thomas Matson." Bradshaw indicated the toad. "From the Non-fer-

rous Lab."

"I know Matson," Jennings said slowly. "That is, I know a Matson from Non-ferrous. But I don't recall—that is, he was taller than this. Almost six feet."

"This is him," Eric said gloomily. "He's a toad, now."

"What happened?" Jennings' scientific curiosity was aroused. "What's the low-down?"

"It's a long story," Eric said evasively.

"Can't you tell it?" Jennings scrutinized the toad professionally. "Looks like a regular type of toad. You're sure this is Tom Matson? Come clean, Blake. You must know more than you're telling!"

Bradshaw studied Eric intently. "Yes, what *did* happen, Blake? You have a strange, shifty look. Are you responsible for this?" Bradshaw rose half from his chair, his grim face bleak. "See here. If it's your fault one of my best men has been incapacitated for further work—"

"Take it easy," Eric protested, his mind racing frantically. He patted the toad nervously. "Matson is perfectly safe—as long as nobody steps on him. We can rig up some sort of protective shield and an automatic communication system that'll enable him to spell out words. He can continue his work. With a few adjustments here and there, everything should speed along perfectly."

"Answer me!" Bradshaw roared. "Are you responsible for this? Is this *your* doing?"

Eric squirmed helplessly. "In a way, I suppose. Not exactly. Not *directly*." His voice wavered. "But I guess you'd say if it hadn't been for me. . ."

BRADSHAW'S face set in a rigid mask of rage. "Blake, you're fired." He yanked a heap of forms from his desk dispenser. "Get out of here and never come back. And get your hand off that toad. It belongs to Terran Metals." He shoved a paper across the desk. "Here's your paycheck. And don't bother looking for work elsewhere. I'm listing you

on the inter-system blacklist. Good day."

"But Mr. Bradshaw—"

"Don't plead." Bradshaw waved his hand. "Just go. Jennings, get your biology staff busy at once. This problem must be licked. I want you to rearrange this toad back to its original shape. Matson is a vital part of Terran Metals. There's work to be done, work only Matson can do. We can't have this sort of thing holding up our research."

"Mr. Bradshaw," Eric begged desperately. "Please listen. I want to see Tom back as he was. But there's only one way we can get him back his original shape. We—"

Bradshaw's eyes were cold with hostility. "You still here, Blake? Must I call my guards and have you dismembered? I'm giving you one minute to be off Company land. Understand?"

Eric nodded miserably. "I understand." He turned and shuffled unhappily toward the door. "So long, Jennings. So long, Tom. I'll be home if you want me, Mr. Bradshaw."

"Sorcerer," Bradshaw snapped. "Good riddance."

"What would you do," Eric asked the robot cab driver, "if your wife had turned to stone, your best friend were a toad, and you had lost your job?"

"Robots have no wives," the driver said. "They are non-sexual. Robots have no friends, either. They are incapable of emotional relationships."

"Can robots be fired?"

"Sometimes." The robot drew his cab up before Eric's modest six-room bungalow. "But consider. Robots are frequently melted down and new robots made from the remains. Recall Ibsen's 'Peer Gynt', the section concerning the Button Molder. The lines clearly anticipate in symbolic form the trauma of robots to come."

"Yeah." The door opened and Eric got out. "I guess we all have our problems."

"Robots have worse problems than anybody." The door shut and the cab zipped off, back down the hill.

Worse? Hardly. Eric entered his

home slowly, the front door automatically opening for him.

"Welcome, Mr. Blake," the door greeted him.

"I suppose Pat's still here."

"Mrs. Blake is here, but she is in a cataleptic state, or some similar condition."

"She's been turned to stone." Eric kissed the cold lips of the statue gloomily. "Hi, honey."

HE GOT some meat from the refrigerator and crumbled it into the belly-cup of the god. Presently digestive fluid rose and covered the food. In a short time the single eye of the god opened, blinked a few times, and focused on Eric.

"Have a good sleep?" Eric inquired icily.

"I wasn't asleep. My mind was turned toward matters of cosmic import. I detect a hostile quality in your voice. Has something unfavorable occurred?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. I just lost my job, on top of everything else."

"Lost your job? Interesting. What else do you refer to?"

Eric exploded in rage. "You've messed up my whole life, damn you!" He jabbed at the silent, unmoving figure of his wife. "Look! My wife! Turned to granite. And my best friend, a toad."

Tinokuknoi Arevulopapo ya w n e d.
"So?"

"Why? What did I ever do to you? Why do you treat me this way? Look at all I've done for you. I only brought you here to Terra. Fed you. Fixed you up a box with straw and water and newspapers. That's all."

"True. You did bring me to Terra." Again an odd gleam flickered across the god's dark face. "All right. I'll restore your wife."

"You will?" Pathetic joy surged through Eric. Tears came to his eyes. He was too relieved to ask any questions. "Gosh, I sure would appreciate it!"

The god concentrated. "Stand out of the way. It's easier to distort the molec-

ular arrangement of a body than to restore the original configuration. I hope I can get it exactly as it was." It made a faint motion.

Around Pat's silent figure the air stirred. The pale granite shuddered. Slowly, color seeped back into her features. She gasped sharply, her dark eyes flashing with fear. Color filled her arms, shoulders, breasts, spreading through her trim body. She cried out, tottering unsteadily. "*Eric!*"

Eric caught her, hugging her tight. "Gosh, honey. I'm sure glad you're all right." He crushed her against him, feeling her heart thump with terror. He kissed her soft lips again and again. "Welcome back."

Pat pulled abruptly away. "That little snake. That miserable particle of waste. Wait until I get my hands on it." She advanced toward the god, eyes blazing. "Listen, you. What's the idea? How dare you!"

"See?" the god said. "They never change."

Eric pulled his wife back. "You better shut up or you'll be granite again. Understand?"

Pat caught the urgent rasp in his voice. She subsided reluctantly. "All right, Eric. I give up."

"Listen," Eric said to the god. "How about Tom? How about restoring him?"

"The toad? Where is he?"

"In the Biology Lab. Jennings and his staff are working on him."

The god considered. "I don't like the sound of that. The Biology Lab? Where is that? How far away?"

"Terran Metals. Main Building." Eric was impatient. "Maybe five miles. How about it? Maybe if you restore him Bradshaw will give me my job back. You owe it to me. Set things back the way they were."

"I can't."

"You can't! Why the hell not?"

"I thought gods were omnipotent," Pat sniffed petulantly.

"I can do anything—at short range. The Terran Metals Biology Lab is too far. Five miles is beyond my limit. I can

distort molecular arrangements within a limited circle only."

ERIC was incredulous. "What? You mean you can't turn Tom back?"

"That's the way it is. You shouldn't have taken him out of the house. Gods are subject to natural law just as you are. Our laws are different, but they are still laws."

"I see," Eric murmured. "You should have said."

"As far as your job goes, don't worry about that. Here, I'll create some gold." The god made a motion with its scaly hands. A section of curtain flashed suddenly yellow and crashed to the floor with a metallic tinkle. "Solid gold. That ought to keep you a few days."

"We're no longer on the gold standard."

"Well, whatever you need. I can do anything."

"Except turn Tom back into a human being," Pat said. "Fine god you are."

"Shut up, Pat," Eric muttered, deep in thought.

"If there were some way I could be closer to him," the god said cautiously. "If he were within range. . . ."

"Bradshaw will never let him go. And I can't set foot around there. The guards will tear me to bits."

"How about some platinum?" The god made a pass and a section of the wall glowed white. "Solid platinum. A simple change of atomic weight. Will that help?"

"No!" Eric paced back and forth. "We've got to get that toad away from Bradshaw. If we can get him back here—"

"I have an idea," the god said.

"What?"

"Perhaps you could get me in there. Perhaps if I could get onto the Company grounds, within range of the Biology Lab. . . ."

"It's worth a try," Pat said, putting her hand on Eric's shoulder. "After all, Tom's your best friend. It's a shame to treat him this way. It's—it's un-Terran."

Eric grabbed his coat. "It's settled. I'll

drive as close as I can to the Company grounds. I ought to be able to get near enough before the guards catch sight of me to—"

A crash. The front door collapsed abruptly in a heap of ash. Teams of robot police surged into the room, blast guns ready.

"All right," Jennings said. "That's him." He strode quickly into the house. "Get him. And get that thing in the box."

"Jennings!" Eric swallowed in alarm. "What the hell is this?"

Jennings' lip curled. "Cut out the pretense, Blake. You're not fooling me." He tapped a small metal case under his arm. "The toad revealed all. So you've got a non-terrestrial in this house, have you?" He laughed coldly. "There's a law against bringing non-Terrans to Earth. You're under arrest, Blake. You'll probably get life."

"Tinokuknoi Arevulopapo!" Eric Blake squeaked. "Don't forsake me at a time like this!"

"I'm coming," the god grunted. It heaved violently. "How's this?"

THE robot police jerked as a torrent of force erupted from the box. Abruptly they disappeared, winking out of existence. Where they had stood a horde of mechanical mice milled aimlessly, spilling frantically through the doorway, out into the yard.

Jennings' face showed astonishment and then panic. He retreated, waving his blaster menacingly. "See here, Blake. Don't think you can scare me. We've got this house surrounded."

A bolt of force hit him in the stomach. The bolt lifted him and shook him like a rag doll. His blaster skidded from his fingers, falling to the floor. Jennings groped for it desperately. The blaster turned into a spider and crawled rapidly off, out of his reach.

"Set him down," Eric urged.

"All right." The god released Jennings. He crashed to the floor, stunned and frightened. He scrambled wildly to his feet and ran from the house, down

the path to the sidewalk.

"Oh dear," Pat said.

"What is it?"

"Look."

Pulled up in a circle around the house was a solid line of atomic cannon. Their snouts gleamed wickedly in the late afternoon sunlight. Groups of robot police stood around each cannon, waiting alertly for instructions.

Eric groaned. "We're sunk. One blast and we're finished."

"Do something!" Pat gasped. She prodded the box. "Enchant them. Don't just sit there."

"They are out of range," the god replied. "As I explained, my power is limited by distance."

"You in there!" a voice came, magnified by a hundred loudspeakers. "Come out with your hands up. Or we open fire!"

"Bradshaw," Eric groaned. "He's out there. We're trapped. You sure you can't do something?"

"Sorry," the god said. "I can put up a shield against the cannon." It concentrated. Outside the house a dull surface formed, a globe rapidly hardening around them.

"All right," Bradshaw's magnified voice came, muffled by the shield. "You asked for it."

The first shell hit. Eric found himself lying on the floor, his ears ringing, everything going around and around. Pat lay beside him, dazed and frightened. The house was a shambles. Walls, chairs, furniture, all was in ruins.

"Fine shield," Pat gasped.

"The concussion," the god protested. Its box lay in the corner on its side. "The shield stops the shells, but the concussion—"

A second shell struck. A wall of pressure rolled over Eric, stunning him. He skidded, tossed by a violent wind, crashing against heaps of debris that had been his house.

"We can't last," Pat said faintly. "Tell them to stop, Eric. Please!"

"Your wife is right," the god's calm voice came, from its overturned box.

"Surrender, Eric. Give yourself up."

"I guess I better." Eric pulled himself up on his knees. "But golly, I don't want to spend the rest of my life in prison. I knew I was breaking the law when I smuggled the damn thing in here, but I never thought—"

A third shell hit. Eric tumbled down, his chin snacking the floor. Plaster and rubble rained down on him, choking and blinding him. He fought his way up, grabbing hold of a jutting beam.

"Stop!" he shouted.

There was sudden silence.

"Are you willing to surrender?" the magnified voice boomed.

"Surrender," the god murmured.

Eric's mind raced desperately. "I—I have a deal. A compromise." He thought fast, his brain in high gear. "I have a proposal."

There was a long pause. "What's the proposal?"

ERIC stepped warily through the rubble to the edge of the shield. The shield was almost gone. Only a shimmering haze remained, through which the circle of atomic cannon was visible, the cannon and the robot police.

"Matson," Eric gasped, getting his breath. "The toad. We'll make the following deal. We'll restore Matson to his original shape. We'll return the non-Terrestrial to Ganymede. In return, you waive prosecution and I get my job back."

"Absurd! My Labs can easily restore Matson without your help."

"Oh yeah? Ask Matson. He'll tell you. If you don't agree, Matson will be a toad for the next two hundred years—at least!"

A long silence followed. Eric could see figures moving back and forth, conferring behind the guns.

"All right," Bradshaw's voice came at last. "We agree. Drop the shield and come forward. I'll send Jennings with the toad. No tricks, Blake!"

"No tricks." Eric sagged with relief. "Come along," he said to the god, picking up the dented box. "Drop the shield

and let's get this over with. Those cannon make me nervous."

The god relaxed. The shield—what was left of it—wavered and faded, blinking off.

"Here I come." Eric advanced warily, the box in his hands. "Where's Matson?"

Jennings came toward him. "I have him." His curiosity overcame his suspicion. "This ought to be interesting. We should make a close study of all extra-dimensional life. Apparently they possess science much in advance of our own."

Jennings squatted down, placing the small green toad carefully on the grass.

"There he is," Eric said to his god.

"Is this close enough?" Pat asked icily.

"This is sufficient," the god said.

"This is exactly right." It turned its single eye on the toad and made a few brief motions with its scaly claws.

A shimmer hovered over the toad. Extra-dimensional forces were at work, fingering and plucking at the toad molecules. Abruptly the toad twitched. For a second it shuddered, an insistent vibration lapped over it. Then—

Matson ballooned into existence, the familiar bean-pole figure, towering over Eric and Jennings and Pat.

"Lord," Matson breathed shakily. He got out his handkerchief and wiped his face. "I'm glad that's over. Wouldn't you want to go through *that* again?"

Jennings retreated hurriedly toward the circle of cannon. Matson turned and headed after him. Eric and his wife and god were suddenly alone in the center of the lawn.

"Hey!" Eric demanded, cold alarm plucking at him. "What is this? What the hell's going on?"

"Sorry, Blake," Bradshaw's voice came. "It was essential to restore Matson. But we can't alter the law. The law is above any man, even me. You're under arrest."

Robot police swarmed forward, grimly surrounding Eric and Pat. "You skunk," Eric choked, struggling feebly.

Bradshaw came out from behind the

cannon, hands in his pockets, grinning calmly. "Sorry, Blake. You should be out of jail in ten or fifteen years, though. Your job will be waiting for you—I promise. As for this extra-dimensional being, I'm quite interested in seeing it. I've heard of such things." He peered toward the box. "I'm happy to take charge of it. Our Labs will perform experiments and tests on it which will. . ."

Bradshaw's words died. His face turned a sickly hue. His mouth opened and closed, but no sounds came.

From the box came a swelling, frenzied buzz of rage. "*Nar Dolk!* I knew I'd find you!"

BRADSHAW retreated, trembling violently. "Why, of all persons. Tinokuknoi Arevulopapo! What are you doing on Terra?" He stumbled, half falling. "How did you, that is, after so long, how could—"

Then Bradshaw was running, scattering robot police in all directions, rushing wildly past the atomic cannon.

"*Nar Dolk!*" the god screamed, swelling with fury. "Scourge of the Seven Temples! Flotsam of Space! I *knew* you were on this miserable planet! Come back and take your punishment!"

The god burst upward, flashing into the air. It raced past Eric and Pat, growing as it flew. A sickening, nauseous wind, warm and damp, lapped at their faces, as the god gained speed.

Bradshaw—*Nar Dolk*—ran frantically. And as he ran he *changed*. Immense wings sprouted from him. Great leathery wings, beating the air in frantic haste. His body oozed and altered. Tentacles replaced legs. Scaly claws replaced arms. Gray hide rippled, as he flew up, wings flapping noisily.

Tinokuknoi Arevulopapo struck. For a brief moment the two locked together,

twisting and rolling in the air, wings and claws raking and flapping.

Then *Nar Dolk* broke away, fluttering up. A blazing flash, a pop, and he was gone.

For a moment Tinokuknoi Arevulopapo hovered in the air. The scaly head turned, the single eye glancing back and down at Eric and Pat. It nodded briefly. Then, with a curious shimmy, it vanished.

The sky was empty except for a few feathers and the dull stench of burning scales.

ERIC was the first to speak. "Well," he said. "So that's why it wanted to come to Terra. I guess I was sort of exploited." He grinned sheepishly. "The first Terran ever to be exploited."

Matson gawked, still peering up. "They're gone. Both of them. Back to their own dimension, I guess."

A robot policeman plucked at Jennings' sleeves. "Shall we arrest anyone, sir? With Mr. Bradshaw gone you are next in charge."

Jennings glanced at Eric and Pat. "I suppose not. The evidence has departed. It seems somewhat silly, anyhow." He shook his head. "Bradshaw. Imagine! And we worked for him for years. Damn strange business."

Eric put his arm around his wife. He pulled her against him, hugging her tight. "I'm sorry, honey," he said softly. "Sorry?"

"Your present. It's gone. I guess I'll have to get you something else."

Pat laughed, pressing against him. "That's all right. I'll let you in on a secret."

"What?"

Pat kissed him, her lips warm against his cheek. "As a matter of fact—I'm just as glad."

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Was she to be cheated out of the loneliness, the loveliness of dying?

THE MONITOR

By MARGARET ST. CLAIR

*The Earthlings were either
too young or too old
to look after themselves. . . .*

I WOULD die on the ship," Mona said. She held out her elderly, shaking fingers to the fire. The smoke rose in a thin vertical thread through the still night air to make a sluggish haze above her head. "Would it give you so much satisfaction, Rex, to have

me die there instead of here, at home—on earth?"

Rex's thin face burned red. "Mother!" he said bitterly and then, controlling himself with an effort, "I suppose there's no use arguing with you. Why do you make me out a brute? Do you think I want to leave Earth? Why, I'd rather lose an arm or leg! I didn't realize until now just how hard it was going to be. You women talk so much about your feelings—do you think, because we men are less vocal, that we don't have them too?"

"But we have to go. The Methwyn have found a fine new planet for us, and we couldn't get through another winter. And your idea of staying on here, all alone—it's craziness. I won't have it. You've simply got to get over it."

Mona was silent for a moment. Across the fire Helen, her daughter-in-law, was looking at her sympathetically. "I'd be all right," Mona said slowly. "You could leave me some food, and I'd pick nuts and berries. I could live in one of the huts, and burn wood from the others."

"It—you wouldn't last three months," Rex said with the brutality of exasperation. "Why are you so determined to stay, mother? All this—" his gesture included the trees, the night, the other fires, the earth—"is over with."

"Not for me," Mona answered. "All I ever had was here on earth."

"Rex, can't you understand how it is? You're young, you can talk about a ten-year voyage into space and not mind it. But my life's nearly over. I worked hard—"

"The Smyth tables," Rex said warmly. "Mother, you don't realize what an achievement that was. The Methwyn are helping us. They've found a refuge for us. But without your tables we couldn't even think about going into space."

"You're proud of the tables, aren't you?" Mona answered, smiling. "You've been a good son. But it doesn't seem to matter any more. It's far away from me. I worked hard, I had children. One of them, a little girl named Doris, died that year we had so little food. And your

father, Rex, has been dead for nearly twenty years. All my ties are with Earth. Haven't I—haven't I earned the right to choose where I'll end my life?"

Rex's dark brows contracted savagely. "Be quiet!" he said in a shaking voice. He got up from the fire and walked away.

"He doesn't mean to be unkind," Helen said softly. "He'd stay—we all would—if we could. But the Methwyn are right, Mona. If we stay here any longer, we won't have power enough for the voyage."

Mona rubbed her thin hands together. "The Methwyn." She sighed. "I can't get used to them. That's another reason why I don't want to go."

"Are you afraid of them?" Helen asked curiously.

"No, not afraid. But it seems so strange, Helen, for us to be taking orders from creatures that we sent out two hundred years ago!"

"They aren't orders," Helen said quickly. "Only suggestions. We'd all be dead, Mona, if the Methwyn hadn't come back when they did. And they act only for our good. Our welfare. They keep us from making mistakes."

"I know. I know. But before we made our own mistakes."

"So many mistakes!" Helen said quizzically.

"Yes. Looking back over our history, it seems like nothing but mistakes. We fought, we suffered, we destroyed. But always we wanted something better. Even in our worst mistakes, we tried."

"Now, whatever happens, whatever triumphs we have on the new planet where the Methwyn say they're taking us, they won't be *our* triumphs. Not ours. A new phase. . . ."

"A better phase," Helen said urgently. "It was planned that way, two hundred years ago. It's got to be better."

"Perhaps. It doesn't seem real to me. Now that we're leaving earth, finally and forever, oughtn't somebody to stay? For the sake of earth. Because of all the mistakes."

Helen got up to put another timber

on the fire. Mona said, "You're going to have a child, aren't you, Helen?"

"Why . . . how did you know? It's so soon."

"From your eyes."

Helen sank down beside the fire and clasped her hands together over her knees. "Doesn't that make any difference, Mona? The baby, I mean. You'd be a grandmother."

"You'll have your own mother, dear. I want to stay. Helen, I can't tell you how much I want to stay."

"Yes. Listen, Mona. You'd better hide."

"You mean that Rex—oh, surely not. Not his own mother."

"I think he would, though. But we have to leave within the next few days, the Methwyn say. Rex won't endanger all of us to hunt for you."

"I suppose not. Thank you, Helen, for telling me."

MONA was old, and perhaps her hiding place was not well chosen. Rex found her on the second day and carried her back like a sack of wheat to the ship the Methwyn had helped to build. They passed Helen in the corridor; she looked at Mona with a shocked face. Then Rex had bundled Mona into one of the tiny cabins and was locking the door.

"You can get me for this, Mother," he said, without looking at her. "Interference with personal freedom is a serious charge. Go ahead. It won't matter. By the time I let you out, we'll be in space." She could hear his heavy, authoritative steps receding in the corridor.

Mona was too sensible to shout, to beat uselessly on the metal door. She lay down on the narrow bunk and tried to rest. She was aching tired.

After ten minutes she was up again, pacing about the cabin. Two steps and two steps and two steps. Two steps about the cabin for the next ten years. But outside the whole limitless earth was waiting like a virgin for her steps.

She couldn't bear it. She went to the shutter and tried to open it but Rex, afraid, no doubt, that seeing what she

was so reluctant to leave would excite her, had wedged it shut. She worked at the catch until her fingers were raw, but could not open it. And this last denial seemed to her more cruel than his compulsion of her had been.

The hours passed. Mona could feel the vibration of the metal as the last fuel and supplies were taken on. The jet-off would come soon now. And in her sick longing, her hopelessness, Mona would have liked to hasten it.

A key turned slowly and softly in the lock. It was Helen, looking very white. "Hurry," she breathed, "don't make any noise, Mona. Rex will be angry. But I couldn't stand the look on your face."

She led the older woman through a passage, down a stair. They reached an exit port. Helen, fumbling uncertainly with the switches, opened it.

"We're jetting in forty minutes," she said. "But I don't think you'll be missed." She handed her food tablets.

"Thank you, Helen . . . if your child is a girl, will you name her after me?" "Oh, yes."

The two women kissed. Helen's cheek was wet. "Good-by," she said, holding Mona's hand. "Good-by. Good luck."

"Good-by, dear."

Mona slipped through the shadows, regretting the light color of her cloak. But Helen was right, she wasn't missed. Everyone was busy with the loading, no doubt.

She reached a rise from which she could see the ship. Now that she was free of it, now that she didn't have to go, she found to her surprise that she wanted to watch the jetting off. She sat down under a pine tree, cushioned on needles. The rough bark against her back was a wonderful voluptuousness.

She was going to stay. Already, in the darkness and the silence, she could feel her heart, that had been so oppressed and confined, expand in anticipation. Time lay before her, a wealth of unspoiled days. And earth, no longer diminished by the presence of humanity, would expand too and breathe deep in freedom and release.

The old woman looked up at the sky. It was getting colder, in a few days it would snow. The soft white flakes would come down out of the air—not many of them, for earth was dry now—and Mona would catch the crystals on her hands and smile at them. Each one would be different, in the infinite beauty and delight of earth. Each one would belong to her.

The winter would be cold, but she might weather it. It was thinkable. And if that happened, she would get to see the spring. Earth, the great dancer, moving in her whirling circuit about her lord the sun, would tip her cheek toward him again, and all the little lives of earth would respond. There would be new leaves and forest lilies and even birds.

But even if she could not reach the spring, the winter would be wonderful. There would be smoky sunrises and red sunsets and her own footprints in the scanty snow. And each day, each moment, each breath down to the last breath of all, would be full of bliss. She would be on Earth.

"Mona," a voice behind her said unctuously, "you must go back to the ship."

Mona whirled about, her heart pounding horribly. John, her husband, who had been dead for twenty years, was speaking to her.

He was badly done. He wavered and wobbled about the edges. It was natural enough.

"Oh, a Methwyn," Mona said. She spoke scornfully, but her lips were trembling. "Go away. You aren't wanted here."

The Methwyn hesitated. Then it shaped itself clumsily into a child four or five years old. Mona realized with a touch of nausea that the Methwyn was trying to project a simulacrum of Doris,

the little girl she had lost so many years ago.

"Mama," the Methwyn piped shrillingly, "let's go back to the ship. You'll catch cold out here."

Mona pressed her fist to her lips. The tears of age and weakness were swimming in her eyes. Was she to be cheated after all, cheated out of the loneliness, the loveliness, the wonderful days of dying? The Methwyn was trying to persuade her, but if persuasion failed . . . with a desperate effort she controlled herself.

"Go back to the ship," she said sharply. "The others need you. You must help them. I will stay here. It is my *order* to you."

Her voice had rung out commandingly, and the Methwyn hesitated. It hesitated so long that Mona, backing away, had time to think hopefully of making a run for it. Then it shook its head, almost regretfully. The ill-made cranium bobbed about grotesquely on the babyish neck.

"I cannot allow you," it said in its bland voice. "It is not a part of the plan. To stay here would not—" it seemed to search for words and then come up with a clinching argument—"to stay here would not be *good* for you."

Mona's knees had turned to water. She could not run. A scream might have alarmed the Methwyn. She could not get a sound past the constriction in her throat.

The Methwyn scooped her up easily in its arms. Through the limber smoke of its body she caught a final swirling glimpse of trees, of sky, of earth. "It would not be good for you," the Methwyn said once more. Then it carried Mona carefully and gently back to the ship.

Top-Flight Science Fiction in Our Companion Magazines—

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THE ETHER VIBRATES

(Continued from page 6)

look at the front pages of *The New York Times* a hundred years from now.

ETHERGRAMS

SOME of these ethergrams read as if the authors could stand a little ether, but of course that only adds to their charm.

COURAGE AND STANDARDS

by Joe Burns

Dear Mr. Mines: I am very glad you had the courage to print Sturgeon's *WAGES OF SYNERGY*. Isn't there some sort of a magazine taboo regarding sex? However, the sex angle is not the reason for my satisfaction at the story's appearance. It is because Sturgeon has here said something that very much needed to be said although I do wish it could have been enlarged upon a bit more. I refer, of course, to the concept he brings up when he has Prue and Killilea discussing the difference between morals and ethics. It appears to me that in a not easy to grasp way this concept constitutes the crux of the problem that has maintained itself throughout man's history; that of his inability to employ reason in any adequate degree in his struggle against what Robert Lindner has called the "triad of limitations."

Ever since the first sucker dragged up the first slab of dinosaur meat or the first bundle of flint ax-heads and dumped them down before the high priest's altar . . . for the high priest and the leader of the tribe to gloat and chuckle over in private. . . man in the mass has had his morals foisted upon him by individuals, parties or institutions who invariably secured benefits thereby; and this unopposed by all but a very few individuals, because, although all men have always had the potentialities of employing reason, very few have been able to develop those potentialities owing to the machinations of the prevailing vested institutions.

The success of these machinations depends wholly upon keeping men from being individuals, from developing their inherent potential reason. This they do by getting almost all men to think alike by giving them a standard set of morals and, at the same time, by discouraging, in ways that they know how, a sense of ethics in individuals. As a final

thought . . . how's this for a watchword: there is nothing to taboo but taboo.—845 NO. 22 St. Milw. Wis.

Methinks you wax a bit cynical, brother Burns. The fact is, that despite your manufactured mass morals, thousands of men have thought, spoken and written independently and even rebelliously, and these utterances have been heard and have found their way into print. Below a certain level of intelligence there is undoubtedly wide acceptance of standard ideas, but above that—well, a fellow named Abe Lincoln once said, "—but you can't fool all the people all of the time." There are ups and downs in the process and at some periods in history books are burnt. But the pendulum swings the other way sooner or later.

DEBATING SOCIETY

by Charles Gribble

Dear Mr. Mines: *THE LAST SPRING* was magnificent. It is an excellent and penetrating analysis of society.

Your letter column deserves high praise. It is refreshing to read a letter column where interesting and worthwhile subjects are discussed instead of wading through 15 letters which all begin: "Uhhh . . . I think your magazine is the very best, no foolin'," and thereafter we are subjected to a large amount of drivel about the stories. It is nice to give the editor a pat on the back for a good job but the readers have already read the story and formed their own opinion about it. Most of us don't care to have rehashed in long, boring detail the stories we read only a month or two previously. Criticism of stories is fine but let's keep it short and to the point.

Please don't pay any attention to the extremely vociferous gang who want to remove all letters which touch religion, birth control, or other touchy subjects. Science fiction has always been a pioneer and has not been hide-bound to the taboos of other literature. As long as the letters are intelligent and unprejudiced, let's hear them! Everybody has a right to have his or her opinion heard, and such letters are a much better use of space than are long-winded and tedious ratings.

If you can't print the rest of this letter could you please print the following: I am a senior in high school and a debater. I would like to correspond with some intelligent teen-

age readers, both boys and girls. Thanks—1125
Gordon, Lansing, Michigan

To borrow a phrase from our immortal predecessor, Charles has assuredly flang the gauntlet. Tough kids they turn out of high school these days, wants to take on everybody. So happens we feel the same way about letters—let 'em get mad about anything they like, so long as they're intelligent.

SECOND CHANCE FOR MONKEYS

by R. C. Sandison

Dear Mr. Mines: Just a note to congratulate you on publishing "The Last Spring" by George H. Smith. For my particular taste, it was the only really good story in the issue. Few people can write convincing irony, but Mr. Smith does it quite handily.

Of course, it is nice to think that incinerating a few leaders could solve mankind's problems, but actually I suspect it wouldn't matter much. After all, even in the distastorships, these men didn't become leaders without some popular support, so the new crop would be pretty much a replica of the old. To be a jerk is human; to be anything else, improbable.

Of course, there is a solution, toward which we seem to be heading rapidly—a third world war. This (or at worst, a fourth one) if properly fought with atom, helium and cobalt bombs, plus bacteria and the "fantastic weapons" Truman used to speak of, should insure the monkeys (or perhaps the protozoa) a second chance.

And it seems impossible that they shouldn't do better the second time around. Box 1884, Denver 1, Colo.

We are inundated with gloomy philosophers this day, it would seem. Don't think much of your solution, however, even with the kindest feelings toward the monkeys and protozoa. A war fought with the proper kind of atom, helium and cobalt bombs you outline wouldn't even leave a toehold for the protozoa. And what good would Earth, glowing like a nova do anyone, except perhaps to provide a little more light for one of Ray Bradbury's Martians to read his paper by?

SWOLLEN DOMES

by J. Martin Graetz

Dear, sweet Sam: Please get rid of Popp. He is got a one-track mind. And because of

your new policy of not having green Bems on the cover, You has got Popp so frustrated he's gone an' drew a *Green Hero!* And please tell me what that B-girl is doing in that florence flask. Really, that cover could have been made a thousand times better by putting in a shimmering patch of greenish-white nothingness in place of the woman with the inaccurate face.

George H. Smith? Don't believe it.

Now about that editorial. Leinster illustrates the very thing that Groff Conklin pointed out in his review of Bretnor's now s-f symposium. It's a fact that science-fiction takes itself much too seriously. While I agree with Mr. Jenkins that there is a lot of coldly clinical reasoning in science, I don't think that it is up to the stf-ictioneer to take upon himself a "stfan's burden." Indeed, Mr. Fitzgerald contradicts himself in the first and last paragraphs of his editorial. He says he wouldn't say we have a mission, but then he says that we have a noble purpose. Frankly, I don't think science-fiction has any mission at all. It is a form of entertainment that is more highly imaginative than most others, and for that reason I enjoy it. Fan activities, as far as I am concerned are almost something entirely different. Of course, not really different, because otherwise I wouldn't be writing this letter.

But I think that when anything not specifically designed for the job begins to think that it has a noble purpose in life, it is taking itself too seriously and/or is getting too big-headed. And I might as well go on and stick my big head out all the way. Stf is getting too swelledomed. Remember that editorial comment you made on my letter in the February STARTLING about whether fandom will accept a widening audience for s-f or will want to stay in the van, ahead and away from the "madding crowd?" Greater men have died of apoplexy because of lesser paradoxes, but I'm willing to bet that fandom wants both. They want everyone to read s-f, but only a few to become fen. Perfectly possible, but what a hell of a disappointment to those newcomers who want to break in. Okay, here's my neck. Anyone got an axe?

Quick rundown of TEV.

Sam, what's wrong with landscape covers? Mrs. Jones didn't mean, I'm sure, that every cover had to be a scene, but I've never received any notices to subscribers from other well-known mags who have run beautiful landscapes to the effect that they are going out of business due to lack of circulation. Loosen up, man.

Half of Brad's GOLDEN APPLES isn't s-f and most reviewers, including the NEW YORKER consider the general quality of the book as below Bradbury's previous standards.

Why should I bother to attack Deeck? He

hasn't anything to say. By the way, Bill, if you'd mentioned Caravan's name once more, you could have had enough syllables to fill a complete line.

Remember FRAMP, Omaha's First Fanzine, 5c per copy, to appear around the first of July.

Grabbish? Speakin' of Pogoisms, think anyone should pub a fanzine called M WEEK? Thought not.—307 So. 52 St. Omaha 3, Nebraska.

Well, well, a fan without a mission—except to sell a few copies of FRAMP. Wondered if anyone would come up on the opposite side of Leinster's fence. Arthur Koestler takes this argument even further. He says fiction can never become literature precisely because it is science fiction. Imagination unlimited, he contends, cuts its own throat. Who can identify himself with a green, scaly, eight-armed BEM? Where science fiction becomes a good literature it is precisely in proportion to its lessening of science fiction. He hadn't read it, but he might have offered here in argument, *THE WAGES OF SYNERGY* which was so effective because it held down the fantastic, or super-science elements and drew instead a character portrait of people. In short, Koestler says, if you want to have universality of appeal, you have to curb your fantasy to the point where it can not only be accepted, but recognized by the imagination. And your imagination works in terms of things you already know. He does not overlook the fact that there is an audience which wants to be stimulated to new limits of imagination, but this he holds, will always restrict the size of the audience.

Well, shucks, isn't that what Ken Crossen said a while back, which got everybody after his neck?

BOOT CAMP

by Pvt. W. G. Calkins,
1341270 USMC

Dear Sam: How do you like my new (United States Marine Corps) stationery? Quite a change from what you expected from me, I'll bet. Well, to tell you the truth, it's quite a change from what I expected from myself, and I'm the guy who's running this show on this end. (Or am I? Seems to me I remember a guy named Fort saying something or other about this. And Eric Frank Russell. And

a couple of others. You know anything about this?)

Right now I'm in boot camp down at San Diego—at the West Coast's version of Parris Island, the Marine Corps Recruiting Depot, with occasional side trips to Camp Matthews and Camp Pendleton. As boots we're pretty well looked after, let me tell you, and free time is rather scarce and rather far between.

I stood it for about six weeks. Worked 18 hours a day and slept '6. Then something broke. I couldn't stand it any longer. So, I went to my platoon sergeant and asked him a little favor. He granted it; so I wrote home and asked them. Presto—four science fiction mags arrived in the mail the other day. Three of them were yours, and the fourth was ASF. So, you can see who I turn to when I want readable science fiction, can't you?

I've been reading the magazines off and on, in between swipes at cleaning my rifle and washing clothes. So far I've finished FSM and SS, and TWS is floating around the camp somewhere. One of the Sgt's got it, and I haven't seen it since, but I will, darn it.

Reading matter of any kind is rather scarce around here so anything you can find gets read almost from cover to cover in no time flat. Of course, you'll find the greatest majority of people around here don't understand what they're reading or even get any great deal of enjoyment out of it, but it passes time, anyhow. Too, some of them won't touch anything but sex.

So far I've gained quite a reputation in the platoon for reading science fiction, but I'll be darned if I can find anyone else who does. Of course, a platoon is only about 75 men, and you don't get to know anybody else in other platoons hardly at all, so it would be rather hard to find any fan here. I mean, after all, you don't just walk up to a person and ask him such an intimate question as "do you read science fiction?" It's something that you have to know a person for years and years before you can ask them about it. I found that out after trial-and-error research. You should have seen some of the looks these recruits have given me after I've walked up to them (mostly people I've never even seen before, let alone speak to) and asked them if they've ever read any science fiction.

You'd think I was crazy, or something! Maybe I am at that, tho, being where I am. But heck, we've all gotta go sometime. I'm pretty lucky, I figure. I got a 137 on my General Classification Test, which is quite high—more than enough to put me in Officer's Candidate School—and I have high hopes of being put in Public Relations as a combat correspondent. That way I can further my writing career and get a little basic information, as well as on the job training. Too, I figure the

Marine Corps will give me a little depth of perception and experience and it ought to mature me a little bit, anyhow. You can't write readable fiction from an inexperienced or immature viewpoint—it just won't have the solidarity and realism that fiction written by an experienced person would have.

So, all things taken into account, I should get out fairly well—I'll be 21-22, have a little money of my own, and a bit of experience. My next stop will be outside your door at Thrilling Publications, Sam. I figure to get a job as janitor, to begin with (I'll start at the bottom) and work up to assistant editor. I say assistant editor, because after all, there can be only one Samuel Mines. Then, once I have the hang of it all down pat, I'll move away from the big dirty city and build myself a small rancho in the mountains and settle down to free-lance writing. I'll be Bradbury, Heinlein and George O. Smith all rolled in one, with touches of Leinster, Fred Brown and several others added besides.

Hey, who's been using up all of my opium for this pipe?

Say, Sam, hows about a little space to say something about OOPSLA! One last issue will be published on or before this letter sees print if it does, and will be distributed as per usual. Then the mag will be taken over by the Utah Science Fiction League and published under a different title, but will still be sent to all subscribers of OOPSLA! Just wanted to get that straight to all my subbers who happen to read this column and wondered where OOPS had gone to. Of course, probably what will happen is nobody—absolutely nobody—will even know it's gone.

Oh, well, . . .

Well, Sam, I'd better take off now. I'm writing this letter while I'm standing watch as Corporal of the Guard and now I have reports to write and posts to check, so it's time to leave. You just keep publishing, and I'll try to keep reading whenever I can. Heck, I'll be out of boot camp and relatively free in another 9 weeks, and if I don't go straight to Korea then, I'll have plenty of time to catch up on my back reading. I may even plunge back into the turbid waters of fandom once more and start publishing again. How would you like that?

You don't have to shout! 1st Rct Trn Bn Co. A., Plt 158 MCRD, San Diego 40, Cal.

Now you know what happened to Gregg Calkins. Am checking the maintenance squad in the building, Gregg, to see if they expect to need any new janitors in about three years. Take it easy, son, from what I hear about Marine basic training it isn't exactly a rest course.

A LITTLE VITUPERATION

by Walter Scheps

Startling fan: (It's not original? Things are bad all over)

I will not comment on your stories because they were all superb. But I would like to get in a few opinions of mines (that was a pun-son) on a subject dear to my heart, T.E.V.

Firstly my opinion on religious discussion. An S.F. mag is no place to discuss religion. That's all I'll say 'cause I don't want any ticking packages in my mailbox.

Long live Hank Moscowitz! Him I like. Him I agree with. (Sam if you print this letter and cut out the aforementioned part, YOU can expect a ticking package in the mail) Bring back Cap Future! What is the matter among you? Don't you know a good thing when you see it? Is there a Cap Future fan club or something? I want Cap Future! What have you done to Allah Hamilton? You fiend! Bring 'im back! BRING HIM BACK!

Now to get back to the other letters, (Is feeling wondabobble said Pogo) To Cpl. Smith, I remember you. Isn't that thrilling? (Twas a pun) So Mr. Cobb wants a 700 page mag huh? No comment. To all haters of Ken Crossen, CENSORED! ! To creepy Deek, or as Carol McKinney said it, Deek the Geek (haw haw, that struck me funny) back to your sewer. The odor from your letter smells something awful and this jerk has the audacity (or stupidity) to write yet another letter. What is the matter in the midst of him? Be he daft? I guess you've heard the old saying, "The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away". (I'm not sure of the exact words but that's close enough) It seems in Deeks case the Lord either gave too little or took too much.

To get away from Mr. (ptuii) Deek I'd like to dote a little on the case of the fen versies Squeegie Seibel. He seems to be an egotistical buffoon of the first degree. What a creep. He should depart to the happy hunting grounds. (Whenever I mention anything pertaining to Squeegie I use small letters, except of course his name)

And now we come to you Sam. You are a gold mines (ho, ho another one) of humor and information. The one big advantage you have over Merwin is your respect of the average fan. I have never seen you poke fun at any individual who wrote to your mag. Please don't start now.—1102 Longfellow Ave. Bronx 59, N. Y.

Mr. Scheps has at least one very admirable attribute. When he lays about him with his cudgel it is in utter impartiality. Everybody gets a share. Which should insure him a goodly portion of ticking pack-

ages in the mail. And let's hope that puts this particular joke away in mothballs, it's earned a rest.

TO THE SNAKE PIT

by William D. Conner

Dear Mr. Mines: With your permission Sam, I'll take a few cracks at the disillusioned "reformers" of TEV while they're still erupting with such adjectives as "moronic juveniles," "adolescents," etc. To them anything that is humorous is juvenile! They would like to see more serious letters that would probably bore everyone to death. Their keenest delight is to blast an enlightened wag whose crime is nothing more than writing a funny letter to TEV.

I admit that if all the letters in SS were like Roy Seiler's little gem in the August issue, the boys in the white coats would start working overtime. But a few good wise-cracks now and then never hurt anyone except a sourpuss.

I don't see why people let their ulcers get agitated over Barbara Behrman and Willie Deck. Why not just ignore radicals and cranks? Any letters-to-the-editor column is usually a cross section of zany, gripe, serious, and complimentary letters. In a democracy everyone has a right to say what they please; surly then, TEV is run on these lines. Eh Sam? Why don't all you narrow-minded and hot-headed bems start considering others for a change; instead of old No. 1 when you read something that doesn't exactly agree with you? You should remember that IT TAKES ALL KINDS TO MAKE A WORLD.

Without going into a homicidal frenzy, I am going to exhort on the two biggest BOORS in TEV namely Deck and Behrman. Ah! Vengeance is so sweet! The typewriter is mightier than the ray-gun! Willie Deck at the very early age of 17 finally finds out that the stork's occupation isn't flying around increasing human population! Then the little boy considers himself to be a genius!

Barbara Behrman: Put your comic book away for a minute Barb, what I've got to say is more educational than the exploits of Superman. Do you think humor is just for juveniles? Or are you just a sourpuss that got left out when the funny bones were handed out?

I see that the reformers are still after sexy covers. They want more Lunar Landscapes and less Cheesecake. If that's what they want why don't you leave us alone and get their landscapes by looking at old issues of the National Geographic Magazine? Even then they might be offended by a picture of a nude native!

If anyone wants to correspond with me, I'd

appreciate it. I'd also like to join a fan club. Now for one last laconic blast. I'D LIKE TO THROW C. F. CROSSEN TO THE SNAKE PIT: He who would gladly destroy the utter foundation of stf without batting an eyelash! His kind of science fiction could only be described as fantasy fiction.—Route 3, Chillicothe, Ohio.

If anyone is still alive after that atom blast send in your name and address so we'll know we've still got some friends. Anyone dare to correspond with Conner?

AND MATURITY

by Harry S. Clements

Dear Mr. Mines: Mind if I use TEV to pass a few words of appreciation to Barbara Behrman on her fiery letter in the May issue? It was beautiful, Miss Behrman, pure vitriol and TNT from "Dear Sir," to "yours sincerely." I enjoyed it tremendously and agreed with every word having often ground my teeth in annoyance at the style of moronic chitchat that passes back and forth in the readers' column.

However, let us see if we cannot use a little tolerance and take a broad view. Things could be a lot worse you know—in fact they have been. I do not know if you were reading SS and TWS at the age of eleven—I doubt it, but about then there was a character calling himself "Sergeant Saturn" running the readers' page. Not only did this blustering individual with the herringbone decoration encourage the type of subnormal scribbles you abhor, he actually answered them in kind. In fact the BEMS and GHUs and such are hangovers from those earlier and wilder days when they had a language all their own.

Had I the time in those days, together with the inclination and the brass nerve to write to the Sarge such a letter as this might have gone thus:

"Hi Sarge, you Xeno-swilling son of a Martian Grulzak! Mind if I use your video to gab with that luscious space-babe, Babs Behrman?"

See what I mean? Now, honestly, Barbara, have you read anything as bad as that in recent issues? If so then is must have been the day Mr. Mines went to the races and left things to his deputy. (His deputy resents that—Ed.) I'm certain he gets more of that type of letter than he prints. (Good guess—Ed.)

Your complaint is still a good one but let's not jump to conclusions that the writers of these gems of humor and wit that liven up the pages of TEV are either morons or kindergarten infants. Have you ever met a pen-pal for the first time and wondered how such a

dope could write such wonderful letters? Same as these chaps only it's their literary personalities that are dopes. Quite normal, intelligent people, some with degrees as long as your arm. But as soon as they put pen to paper, Dr. Jekyll goes on a vacation and Mr. Hyde has one heck of a time!

Incidentally, a person who can sit between an idiot and a genius and enjoy the conversation of both, answering them each in his own style, is a happy, well-balanced man, usually a practical psychologist or a successful S-F editor.

Anyway I enjoyed the letter, but I hope your footwork is O. K. and you can duck pretty quick. The Old Saturnian Guard are still a force to be reckoned with, they've not entirely disappeared with the retirement of the Sergeant and they are all tough babes. Good luck anyway.—211 Crownfield Rd., Stratford, London E 15, England.

This missive being addressed entirely to Barbara Behrman, it hardly seems to call for comment from us. All, right, you don't have to look so happy!

EMPTY CHAIRS

by Dick Clarkson

Dear Sam: This time it's the August ish of SS staring me up in the face as I greet thee. But this time, 'tis a happy thing for me to be doing this hot, muggy, humid day-after-the-fourth. For never have I seen a story line-up so good in more time than I can think of. Merwin's opus topped the ish, but Ted Sturgeon's was so close that here again rating stories would be an injustice, since they both were so good that placing one below another would be a crime. One short stank: "The Runaway Tricycle." The other two were as good shorts as you've had in ages gone by . . . have to hand it to you, Sam, but it took two months rather than one, to put out this more than superlative issue. Maybe you had reasons for going bi-monthly. "The Last Spring" topped the list of shorts, and it's one of the best you've had all year!

But you're gonna get something besides compliments . . . what was that thing in the back of the ish? A letter column? Then that certainly was one of the poorer ones you've had in equally as long a time! Hank Moskowitz was the one name that was really familiar to me; there were a couple that I had seen before, but that's all. And the letters were far from your normal run in content, personality, humor, and general attractiveness. What happened to Ray Thompson, Chazz Wells, Dick Geis, Joe Keough and Jim Harmon who just got a passing mention? And where are Gregg

Calkins and Joe Gibson . . . didn't they even have one letter between them in two months' aggregation? Not to mention myself . . . tho' I must admit that with that horrible succession of puns it's no wonder that I wasn't there. Out of self-protection you had to keep away. But this was the first dull letter-column SS has had in a long time, and so maybe there are hopes for the future. You would have to wreck an otherwise near-perfect ish by fouling up so bad in the letter column. There always has to be one bug in the ointment.

Leinster's guest-ed was superlative, tho' much had been said in assorted different ways before. Somehow, tho', such a subject remains "new," in that the interest of topics such as those never seems to wear out.

Only other poor feature of the ish was those ghastly greens which adorned the cover . . . damn near scared my nonexistent wits right outta me.

Was Leinster saying that scientific thinking is merely a means to an end? If so, then what is the end? I don't think that there is an end to what are called "scientific wonders." The time-honored cliché says that there is always something new under the sun . . . and if the sun in question isn't Sol, it'll be another one. When we get there, I agree with him where he says that the science-fiction fan has pulled a lotta weight and will continue to do so; but no matter how much he pulls, it is still left to the scientific thinking to resolve into actuality what the fan can imagine.

However, science is growing so big nowadays that you have to specialize. You just can't hope to know all about everything; that'd take more time studying than any three lifetimes rolled into one. Thus, I think that what we have done is to take a sort of all-encompassing view of the sciences, varied as they are, and from the aspect of a conglomeration of everything, say that such things as space-ships, videophones, life on other planets and whatever else may sound semi-reasonable are possible and even probable. That they are right usually is an attribute to their good ability for analyzation and perception. In other words, s-f fans serve as the guys who take in the all-encompassing view that the dyed-in-the-wool scientists cannot take; the latter often can't see the forest because the trees are in the way.

But think—ain't it great to be worth something? After all, we may even be necessary!

—410 Kensington Rd., Baltimore, Md.

There's no satisfying some people. One bunch grumbles that ETHERGRAMS is a private correspondence between yed and a few of his favored friends and what does one have to do to get a letter in the

column . . . and now comes Clarkson to complain that the old standbys are missing. To the first group I've explained that they see a lot of the same names because these characters manage to write the most interesting letters. To Clarkson, forsooth, it becomes necessary to explain that interesting letters are still the gauge of selection, regardless of who writes them—though we do like to see newcomers get a break. Sometimes maybe the letters aren't so interesting, but buh-leeve us, bub, they're the best of the lot.

SAYONARA

by PFC C. S. (Steve) Metchette
U.S. 55273099

Ohio ojisSAM! It's been just a year since I purchased my mags from stateside newsstands, and it will be another year before I see a stateside news stand again. Due to Art Rapp, and the Detroit fans prompted by Howard Devore, I've been receiving parcels of the current issues to keep me abreast, of the times. Since fiction is just as entertaining in Korea and Japan as it is back home.

In November I was billeted a few blocks from Ed Cox, late of 13th Signal Company, 1st Cavalry. Having left the states barely a week previously, seeing an old fan like Ed was rather a surprise. I moved on, and when I got back he was shipping home. I missed saying sayonara to him, but I look forward to seeing him at a con some day and remembering Hokkaido together.

Tetsu Yano-san is now in Los Angeles, and with the company of the LA fen will be at the Philly Con this year, to further stress the "World" claim of the Con. Perhaps just before the new year I'll be able to travel to Kobe and see him, gathering his impressions of American fandom. That should be a unique meeting. Mr. Mines, the only Japanese fan I know of, and a Canadian in the 7th Cavalry, in an important Japanese city. In years to come perhaps those fen who have been over here will return to Tokyo or Kyoto attend a future World Convention and maybe Art Rapp, Lin Carter, Edico, Young, Les Meyer and myself can raise Asahi brew with a shout of Banzai! And remember the days we were in Japan and Korea.

Both Charles Stuart and Garry Owen, two of the rare breed in the locality, share my wishing you continued publication, and we echo Yano-san's good luck. From all of us, Mr. Mines, sayonara . . . nochihodo omeni kakarimas, see you later.—HQ. & HQ. CO., 7th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cav. Div., APO 201, c/o PM, San Francisco.

No telling where World Conventions will show up. We met Tetsu Yano in Philly and found him a thoroughly delightful person.

VARIETY, VARIETY

by L. Gordon Hart

Sam Mines: Got an itch to write and after reading your fan letter columns for the last year I have decided that I would like to join the happy throng. (The happy throng of science fiction fans that is.) Actually I have been a fan for about four years, however I was just a lone fan. I have been laughed at by everyone from my family to my girl friends for being a fan but that has not stopped me. I have made a little progress though, by winning over a couple of people. They are not really ardent fans but they have read a few stories and lo and behold they said science fiction is not so silly after all.

For the life of me I can not see why some people want just certain types of stories instead of a variety. Oh well, maybe they just have a one track mind. I would not buy a mag with just one type, because it would be too dull.

What's with this Wm. Deeck lad? Does he really think like his letter sounds or is he just trying to pull someone's leg? Most people I know that think like that would not even want to write a letter that maybe thousands of other people would read. (Adults & Teenagers). Congratulations Deeck for finding out how you arrived although it seems to have gone to your head.

Sam why can not these people realize that it takes a little of everything to make up this old world that we live in, science, religion, sex, and everything else included. These finicky people will say these things should not be in print together but really finickies do you think you can live with just one of these things and drop all the rest? I think you are just afraid your ears are going to get burned.

For me Sam, keep your mag in line to make the most money. That way I will be sure to get a variety of all different types of science fiction. And for heavens sake don't go to pocket size.

Wonder why everyone seems out for Deeck's blood? Seems harmless enough. Find any clues in a letter like:

NO LITTLE SQUIRT

by Wm. Deeck

Dear Mr. Mines: Pray tell, sir, how do you have putrid novels and novelets in the same issue with terrific short stories. It

would seem that if you could pick good short stories you ought to be able to choose good novels, too. Ah well, that is fate. But do not despair. One half of Irritants, Inc. comes to your rescue. I suggest that you pattern your worst magazine, SS that is, after your best which is FSM. Have the novel a reprint and, just to please everybody, you can have the novelet new and lousy. (See. I want to be friendly!) Keep the short stories on par (remember T. P. Caravan) and you will have a magazine your rivals will be cursing over.

Mr. Sid Sullivan: The Constitution of the U. S. of A. says we are equal. Why do you want to give the privilege of exposing vast quantities of skin to a chosen group of people? Your idea of beauty or sex appeal might differ greatly from mine. Who would judge? Would you or I tell our mothers or sisters to wear overcoats during the summer because they do not fit some one's conception of beauty?

P. S. I AM NOT A LITTLE SQUIRT! I just look like one.

CAROL MCKINNEY: Don't lose all your red corpuscles. It's bad for your system.

I faced myself in the mirror and after kissing my beatific image and congratulating my parents on their good fortune I asked myself your question. The answer I received was so brilliant that even I was astounded by my intellectual prowess. And here it is for you to enjoy: I read SS because after delving into the novels and/or the novelets I enjoy the other magazines that much more.

You mention personal gripes. What are Barbara Behrman and I but two of the same?

John Truax: I have nothing to say to you. You agreed with me in part, and I don't like that.

I went to the dictionary and looked up *riposte*, Mr. Mines. Do I have to fight the fans with swords? You have to get up too close with swords. I'd rather it would be typewriters at a couple hundred miles.

Didn't anybody like my letter?—8400 Potomac Ave., College Park, Md.

Trapped, Deek. You swore you'd never answer any answers to your original letter and here you are in the thick of the fray. I don't know whether you're thick or frayed, but there you are. And we suspect you're enjoying yourself too. We are.

NEVER MIND

by Joe Keogh

Salutations, Sam: You are an editor, and I a fan. How much more diametrically opposed can we get? Yet even editors can enjoy Pogo. I guess it isn't so bad after all. There are some people who write deadly seri-

ous letters, and others who are always seeking to fit the situation to the joke.

If you on your lofty editorial throne will permit a comparison, we are alike in at least one respect. That is that I never try stooping to the latter level, and rarely have you done so. The true aim of wit is fitting it to the situation, not the other way around. This Merwin no did. But Sam, favorite ed., this you always do.

Of course, there is a definite trend of yours in SS to keep it high hat. Please don't reduce the once familiar atmosphere to a hollow core of nothingness. One would think cybernetics is taking over. I am a trend spotter. I don't know whether so many months of being exposed to the steady barrage of fen is making a cynic of you; I wish you won't become another case history for some fanzine editor to write about—THE MIND OF MINES.

They tried it on Merwin, the *greatest* cynic. Remember I'm not saying the Mines wit is gone. But the purpose of it in SS is declining. You remain the same in the other mags.

But Sam, you must tell me why you printed that August issue letter of Moskowitz. Tell me, don't you agree with me that Hank is nothing more than a reactionist? The science out of science fiction, indeed! Don't know who's the worst, Moskowitz or Deek.

Then again, what would you expect from a devout follower of Conan? Like as not Moskowitz would have his hero leading a fleet of spaceships sword in hand, and shouting war cries through the vacuum. Moskowitz calls Bradbury's writing fantasy. But I doubt if Moskowitz looks upon psychology or dianetics as sciences.

You notice I am not talking directly to the braggart, but to you, Sam. What else is a letter for? Technically some trends in TEV point that people will no longer do anything but the formality of saluting you at the start and close, meanwhile addressing all of their varied remarks to authors, illustrators, and other fen. Editors will become obsolete, editorials will topple, editor's salaries . . .

We must admit however, that while having that thought in mind for the guest editorial of Murray Leinster—Will Fitzgerald Jenkins, it's been thought of before, if not said in so many words. And I hate to even admit there was a particle of truth in Randall Garrett's letter, where he said that some writers explain away the fantasy in science-fiction by fictional scientific gadgets. This is true. But this is also the essence of science fiction! Did it ever occur to him that some people, possessed with cold, logical reasoning powers, and vivid imaginations (sound contradictory? One's the mental, other the emotional) will take these statements in their stride only if they are seemingly made logical by pseudo-scientific explanation.

This is the main distinction of science fiction from fantasy, and even though it pangs me a bit, I'll have to admit that in this respect, *stf* IS a part of fantasy. Fantasy can be explained by the supernatural, science fiction by the logical. And in this light, they are BOTH SUBDIVISIONS of explanatory literature, both equal in distinction. (Want me to do an editorial?)—63 Glenridge Ave., St., Catharines, Ont.

What do you mean by the *purpose* of wit in TEV declining? Too high hat? Even wit can be high hat; in fact it is better high hat than on the Sarge Saturn level. Or maybe we missed the point of what you were trying to say.

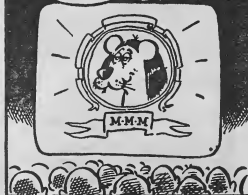
Space runs out again; let's see who's left. M. Desmond Emermy, 93 Hemlock St., St. Thomas Ont., Canada, insinuates slyly that maybe Deeck is our own psuedonym, otherwise why don't we lower the boom on him? Nope, Deeck is not us. We have yet to plant a phony letter in TEV—never needed one. Nick LaPara, 82 Melwex St., Belleville, N.J., takes umbrage at Hank Moskowitz for saying Bradbury writes Martian westerns. Thinks Bradbury is an artist. Carol McKinney, 385 No. 8th East St., Provo, Utah, back home after her jaunt to N.Y. and points south, gets in a dig at Deeck. Fred Christoff, 39 Cameron St. S., Kitchener, Ont. says the only stf in the last issue of SS was in TEV. Didn't like JOURNEY TO MISENUM. Ray Thompson, 425 North 13th St., Salina, Kansas, agrees and adds MOTH AND RUST to the list, opining gloomily that sequels never are worth the trouble. John Truax, 1102 9th St., Rapid City, S.D., wants to know who really wrote THE LONG VIEW—Fletcher Pratt or John D. Clark. The story was written by Fletcher Pratt, the introduction was done by Clark, who also set up the chemistry of the planet Uller.

Dick Geis, 2631 N. Mississippi, Portland 12, Oregon liked JOURNEY TO MISENUM and WAGES OF SYNERGY and says that unless the love interest can be treated as maturely as it was in that story it should be left out. He's agin soap opera science fiction. Vieve Master-son, 2201 Arlington Ave., Birmingham, Ala. wants a copy of SHE by Haggard and



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 Preface and Notes by Samuel Mines
 Jacket by Alex Schomburg

WAR OF THE WORLDS by Wells, cheap, if anyone has them. Mary Corby, 55 Taylor Ave., East Keansburg, N. J. wants to know how such a cute fantasy as **NEVER TEMPT THE DEVIL** got into SS. Wants more. We liked it too. That's a threat. Mark Andrews, 197 Fairway, Sherwood, N. Little Rock, Ark. likes the brawls in **TEV**, keep it a good clean fight, he says. And to add to the fray he is starting a fanzine and wants contributions. Not another!

Bob Cobb, 488 Appleton St., Arlington, Mass., would like to see the arguments on religion go, but not those on sex. In that he's interested. Also thinks a sexy cover pulls better than a rocket cover. Practical, that's him. George Peebles, 434 Highlands Road, Kensington, Johannesburg, TVL, South Africa has become a real stf fan in the last year. He's 18 and wants correspondents. La Wanda Fritz, Box 172, Novato, Cal., didn't care for **MOTH AND RUST** but still wants a copy of **THE LOVERS** and will pay anything with reason for it. SS, August '52, just in case you've forgotten.

J. Wayland Brown, R. 2, Effingham, Ill., would seem to be no longer among us, since he claims he exploded with a boom upon reading about Behrman and Deek. Poor fellow. Charles Wells, 405 E. 62nd St., Savannah, Ga. gently pulls our leg by suggesting that maybe aliens from outer space are behind all our troubles, including our religious bickerings. Elinor Petroff, 219 Cherokee, Pontiac, Mich. says down with sex, let's have some "clean" science fiction for a change. Doesn't seem to like the snarly creatures who inhabit the letter column either. Elinor, we thought it was the column's greatest charm. Jack Breckenridge, 2406 Silverstrand, Hermosa Beach, Cal., wants to know how old we are. Older than he, we bet. Ted Lenoire, Walhachin, B.C., wants Cap Future back and doesn't even mention Moskowitz. Tsk.

Ellen "Rocket" Kaplan, 65-05 Central Ave., Glendale, 27, N.Y. pleads with us to print her letter, but egad, Rocket, you're too young to get into the lovelorn business. Stuart Anderson, 1305 No. 8th, Tacoma 3, Wash., is displeased with all the controversy about sex in the stories and the ar-

gument about what is drivel and what ain't. He reads 'em because he likes 'em, he maintains, and them as don't should go soak their heads. Damp, but no doubt effective. Richard H. Cross, Gen. Deliv., Sunset Park, North Bay, Ont. Canada is hurt because his name came out Gross in the mag. Ever get a look at your handwriting, pal? Was I rich enough to be a philanthropist, there are a couple of hundred thousand people I would send typewriters.

Wally Parsons, 90 Wheeler Ave., Toronto, 8, Ont. Canada, bemoans the fact that he never gets printed in TEV anymore. His letters run 14 pages or more, handwritten. It takes half a day to read them and who can afford a steno to retype them for the printer, who will not set type from handwritten scripts?

Lee Huddleston, Rt. 1, Baird, Texas, says who's afraid of a little argument. Let 'er rip any time. That's Texas. Harry Arms, Asphalt Plaza, Hollyhock, Ohio, thinks Deek crawled out of a Mickey Spillane novel. Unkind, boy, unkind. Bertha Sundet, Lake Preston, S. Dakota applauds our comments on the Louise Pease letter last ish and adds that the battle of the sexes will be over when we reach emotional maturity and learn that there is more happiness in love given than love received. Nice letter, sorry it was so long. Bob Medrow, 2714 N. 76th Court, Elmwood Park 35, Ill., leaves the thought that we shouldn't be hard on the kids who write in—it's tougher for them to raise the two bits than many adults, so there can't be any mistaking their loyalty.

Trina Perlson, 109-11 127th St., South Ozone. Park 20, New York, hates us for changing Phil Farmer's style. He was wonderful, she says in THE LOVERS and MOTHER and then we made him write MOTH AND RUST and it's all our fault. Peg Robinette, Box 732, Paintsville, Kentucky got so engrossed in TEV that she almost missed a wrestling match. What a catastrophe! Ron Ellik finally has control of his emotions after observing that his last letter was not in TEV. He is merely at the bursting point now. If you want to soothe him, his address is 232 Santa Ana, Long Beach 3, Cal.

[Turn page]

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Bobby Gene Warner, Box 63, Bessmay, Texas, says our novelets have gotten better than our novels. And Val Walker, 6438 E. 4th Pl., Tulsa, Okla., says there was a solid year of SS without a bad issue, but it ended with **JOURNEY TO MISENUM**. Is also mad at Hank Moskowitz for "Slandering" Bradbury. Lin Carter, 1734 Newark St. South, St. Petersburg, Fla., says something must be wrong with him because he didn't like either **VULCAN'S DOLLS** or **THE LOVERS**, over which everyone drools. However, he thought **WAGES OF SYNERGY** the best story in two years.

Incidentally, Lin's now studying at Columbia—any other fen on campus?

Jim Harmon, 427 East 8th St., Mt. Carmel, Ill., winds up and takes a roundhouse swing at practically everything. That brief taste of army life curdle you, Jim? Arda Kauer 2007 38th St., Minneapolis, Minn., says we pulled a mean trick on her—didn't print her letter. Mean to say you bought the mag only for that? Thomas O'Dell, 8230 Wisconsin, Detroit 4, Mich. wants more Merwin stories. Irvin Norfleet Jr., 429 W. Essex, Kirkwood 22, Mo. wants less Merwin, but with commendable good taste admits we are wonderful and brilliant. Mike Wigodsky writes in Latin, bad cess to him. Don't you know we got heaved out of Latin class in high school and lost no time in forgetting just about everything.

Wayne L. Fehr, 3320 Carlisle Ave., Covington, Ky., thinks SS improves constantly. Admires, with a shudder, the blood all over the TEV floor and sticks his neck out gingerly, in defending the "children" Miss Behrman lambasted. Paul Mittelbuscher is in the Army. He's a A-3c AF 17 376 007, 501st Air Base Sqdn. O'Hare International Airport, Park Ridge, Ill. and William F. Nolan, 4106 Lincoln Ave., Culver City, Cal., sends along a copy of a letter addressed to E. F. Blieler and Ted Diky, nominating Joe Slotkin's story **THE GINGERBREAD HOUSE** for their annual anthology. His words of praise would bring blushes to the well-baked face of a gingerbread man.

And that tears it—see you all back here soon.

—The Editor.

Science Fiction BOOKSHELF

Reviews of New Books

THE UNDYING FIRE by Fletcher Pratt, Ballantine Books, New York, 160 pp. \$2.00.

THOSE readers who have a copy of the May 1953 STARTLING STORIES will recognize THE UNDYING FIRE as the book version of THE CONDITIONED CAPTAIN, which was presented complete in that issue. Ballantine has dressed it up with a handsome cover by Powers and sent it over with an appreciative blurb which only confirms our own satisfaction in the original choice.

The story is a modern Odyssey—the tale



of Captain Paulsson who was framed and fixed on a charge of dereliction of duty and summarily bounced from the Space Command.

suspecting that he was not personally important enough to warrant such unflattering attention and that his removal must have been only one move in a larger game, the doughty Captain throws convention to the wind and refuses to accept his dismissal gracefully.

Instead, he sets out on a quest to run down the mystery which takes him to a double handful of planets and introduces

[Turn page]

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BALLROOM OF THE SKIES by John D. MacDonald, Greenberg, Publisher, New York, 206 pages, \$2.75.

IT IS our sad, but civic, duty to report that BALLROOM OF THE SKIES is a potboiler which impressed us as being unworthy of the talented typewriter which turned out WINE OF THE DREAMERS and SHADOW ON THE SAND. Mr. MacDonald seems to have caught a slight case of obfuscation, circa van Vogt and attempted the same stunt of having his story gallop off in all directions.

The result is confusion, as it always is. Moreover, the attempt to create menace and an eerie "other world" atmosphere by style alone is forced and unconvincing.

We are resisting manfully the temptation to say something nice about the book merely because we have, under normal circumstances, so high an opinion of Mr. MacDonald's capabilities. It is our conviction that this is a book which should never have been written or published. It is pretentious and empty.

The theme is the now familiar "we are owned by superior beings" who live among us and guide our destinies and fight over us with other inimical superior beings—all unknown to us. The hero is a crusading newspaper man, the girl is an alien disguised as a chippy for the purpose of—who knows?

Buy it if you must. If you're a MacDonald fan you might even like it!

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